

THE ASYLUM
CONFESSIONS

SERIAL KILLERS

JACK STEEN

THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS

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THE ASYLUM CONFESSION FILES

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NOTE TO READERS

Hey Confession Addicts - it's time for a new confession, and I hope you're ready because I've got big plans for this one.

Big plans, you say? (Come on, I know you were thinking it!)

Yep. While I really enjoy these confession books and have no plans of stopping them (for instance, at the end of this book, you'll see me announce Book 8) - I told you in the beginning, I had a lot of these things - I do want to progress into something different too.

There are a few confessions that have stuck with me, so much so that the idea of 'oh, that would make for a good book' won't leave me alone, and so hey, why not! Why not do what other fiction writers have done and take a nugget of information and expand it into something...else.

So yeah, that's what I want to do...I want to write a fictional story loosely based on an 'idea' from a confession...and that confession is going to be in this book.

So...I'm going to try my hand at something a little different. What do you think?

But wait...these books are fictional, right? (Like, come on, I know you think it...).

But are they?

I've told you from the very beginning what I was doing. I also told you I wasn't going to lie to you. I warned you that these shitheads that land on my ward are psychotic psychopaths and just messed in the head. I told you that they like to play head games, and I told you that I would leave it up to you whether you believe me or not.

I'm sticking with all of that.

Those who work in this line of business know. I know you know because you write me and tell me you know.

Everyone else...believe what you want. Fiction. Non-fiction. Fairytale. Horror story. Take your pick and be happy with it - just do me a favor? Don't stop reading!

So, Book Seven. You know this part, but it's worth saying...I try to make sure there are no spelling errors, and I do work with an

editor, but if you're looking for a book written by the next Stephen King, this ain't it.

Although, hey, Stephen King, waving at you...feel free to tell others about these books, would you? A tweet or something wouldn't hurt.

For everyone else, I'm still raising a toast to you all down at the pub!

Appreciate the support. Appreciate the beers. Appreciate that you enjoy these confessions.

And hey - Olin Lester - I'll keep repeating this - thanks for your support! And for those who have picked up this book - go check out Olin Lester's books, you'll probably enjoy them - plus, he's got a new sci-fi series that's pretty good.

To my fellow Asylum addicts on Patreon, long-time readers, and to my new friends...salut!

THANK YOU

Special thank you's to the following "Long Term Patients, Ward Members and Asylum Addicts" from my Patreon page. This book would not be possible without your support!

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These confessions are dedicated to you!

JOIN ME

I'm just going to throw this out there: there will be more books. But while you wait, why not join me over on my Patreon page?

What happens over there? A lot.

For instance - this new book I'm writing...you'll read early chapters there. Plus you'll read all patient confessions before they're published. Plus...you get to name characters. And...you get free books.

It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out...no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts, and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

WHO AM I?

(Hey you...don't skip this part...important info about this book at the end, even if you already think you know 'who I am')

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you know my name and what these confession books are about.

Just a reminder: I'm a nobody. I'm serious about that.

I'm not a writer, but I am a storyteller (since so many of you tell me this is true, I might as well add it here).

I'm a night nurse in the Asylum, and I listen to the deathbed confessions of the criminally insane.

For these patients of mine, I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel, if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the Asylum: an audience.

By now, you should know the routine...don't ask which Asylum, because I will never tell. Besides, it really doesn't matter which one - they're all the same. Don't ask me about the patients either - I change their names, victims' names, settings, etc...I'm serious about not wanting to get sued.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you: I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard—the ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, and the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, and that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, and left to spend their final days

alone.

Here's a reminder: I won't tell you where I work.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus on one central theme.

This book is about serial killers. We've got such a fascination with them, it's ridiculous - and also probably the reason why we have so many in this country. Trust me when I say there are more serial killers out there than you're aware of.

Scary shit, right?

In this book, we've got:

- a Killer Sister,
- a Psycho Carny,
- a Color-Blind Son,
- and Religious Wife.

I can't say all the stories I'm told are one hundred percent true. Some, I believe. Some I don't.

That shouldn't be surprising, I mean - look at who is telling the confession. Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic, and like the sound of their voices. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice. But, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

THE THEME FOR THESE CONFESSIONS...

Serial Killers.

As a society, boy, do we love them. We've got this hard-on for them that just won't go away. Don't believe me? Think about all the movies and television shows there are out there on that very topic. Hell, think about the podcasts and videos and books that are exploding in real time, all because of our fascination with a nut job who likes to kill people.

I mean, have you seriously thought about it? Me, you...we're part of that demographic. That fascination - we have it just as bad as everyone else.

Why is that?

I won't speak for you, but for me, I want to know why.

Why are they killing these people?

Why those people and not others? Or why random people and not targeted ones?

What made them become a serial killer? Nurture versus nature? Were they taught or self-taught? Was it part of their very basic nature, or did they evolve and grow into being that way?

Why not stop at one? Why start at all?

See...I have questions. So many questions.

One thing I've learned over the years is that there are more serial killers out there than we're told about.

Hell, we've got more here in the Asylum than I want to admit to, and I know other prisons and asylums are the same.

These confessions you're about to read...they answer some of those questions, but they also raise a shit ton more, too.

They also opened my eyes to something I was completely clueless about. Something most of us have no idea is even real, or we think is just one of those conspiracy theories that are out there. You know, like the ones about aliens and JFK and such.

Here's my suggestion for you...read these carefully. Take note of things. Be smarter than I was, because it took me a while to piece

together the puzzle...but now that I have, I hope you can too.

Intrigued yet?

Keep turning the pages.

PATIENT: KAREN

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Ps...Special thanks to Danielle Marie & Shell Winn for helping name those in this confession

CHAPTER ONE

The floor is a madhouse, and because of that, I was called to come in early for my shift.

It's not often things are a shitshow on the death ward, but when they are, it's a duck-and-cover type situation if you want to make it through the night.

Turns out, a fight downstairs broke out, and now my floor is being used as overflow.

We've got everything from broken bones to pierced lungs and worse. One patient had his intestines ripped out with a pair of forks. Talk about ouch.

The guards standing outside the rooms look just as bad. Bruised, bloodied...it was like all hell broke loose while I was watching Supernatural reruns at home.

"What the fuck, man?" Ike opens the employee-only door and surveys the chaos in the hallway. "It's not a full moon or anything, right?"

He walks by a secured patient lying on a cot in the hallway. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Keep repeating that, but it won't help." I dump out the thick sludge left over in the coffee pot. Ain't no way I'm drinking that shit. I unlock a drawer in my office and pull out my secret stash of coffee. I have to keep it in the locked drawer, or the day shift will drink it all. Listen, if they want to drink the shit that comes in our weekly supply run, fine by me, but I've done my time drinking that nasty crap, and it's not worth it anymore.

"You should get the Warden to start ordering that stuff in," Ike says, nodding toward my can of grounds.

"Why? So then everyone can drink it? They're not that special. Besides, I like having something of my own, you know? Management can budget cut all they want, but they'll never come for my coffee."

I realize I'm being nice and giving the day shift a treat with my java, but hey, every once in a while, I can play the good guy.

"Seriously, what the fuck happened? How long has this lockdown been going?"

I finish making the coffee and turn, leaning against the counter, arms crossed. "A few hours now. We've got a full floor, every bed taken."

"Figured that, with the dude out in the hall. So, it's all hands on deck for the whole shift?"

I snort. "Fuck that. Day shift leaves as normal. I called a few reserves to come in. Knock them all out, and we'll be fine."

There's a mixture of relief and disbelief on Ike's face. If I had to guess, the relief was because the day shift wasn't staying, but the disbelief was about my comment that we'll be fine on our own.

Come on, where's the faith?

"Seriously, man, we've handled worse. They won't all be staying either." Of this, I'm one hundred percent certain. I don't care what those fuckers on the lower floors think, I don't appreciate being their discard plan. Just because they got themselves into this mess doesn't mean I need to be involved.

Ike plops his ass down in a chair and leans back. "Damn straight, we've handled worse. I just don't like it. I requested the night shift for a reason, and it had everything to do with not having to deal with this shit, you know?"

"Suck it up, buttercup. I've never known someone to complain so much as you."

He gives me the finger. I give it back, and then we drink our coffee. We should be out on the floor, but we'll be dealing with this shit all night, so why rush it.

"Hoy, hoy, hoy! It's coming, fellas...it's a comin'..." A loud, jeckel-type yell, fills the air.

Shit. That ain't good. It's old man Ellis, I can tell from the voice.

Ike and I both rush forward, then stop.

Old man Ellis is on a bed against the wall. His arms are secured to the rails. He's wearing a hospital gown that barely covers him, and his pasty ass is free and clear of any covers, and it's pointed toward the wall.

"Hoy, hoy, hoy, here it....ugh." The man grunts and spews out shit from his ass.

I'm not making this shit up. An explosion of crap is everywhere - the wall, half the bed, his ass...and it smells like a sink pit in the middle of a garbage dump.

I slowly back away until I'm out of eyesight.

Ike isn't fast enough.

He gets called into action by the day nurse who yells at him to take care of it.

While I continue to drink my coffee and look over files of those on the floor, I hear Ike grumbling as he deals with the mess old man Ellis made. He's not getting his hands dirty, he's getting the minions to do that, but he has to stand there, breathe in the stench, while I'm sitting back here at my desk, trying not so hard to smother my snickers.

Sometimes it's good to be high on the ladder.

CHAPTER TWO

It doesn't take long for things to settle down.

Day shift is gone, I've got a full crew, and patients are being cared for. I couldn't ask for anything else.

Lockdown is over downstairs, so some of these guys have gone back to their floors.

I've still got full rooms, but things are more manageable. Just the way I like it.

The hallway still smells like shit - once it gets in the crevices and cracks in the walls, it doesn't come out. Old man Ellis is back downstairs with a bad case of loose shits, but the man has colon cancer, so it's not surprising.

Eventually, he'll end up back here.

I noticed earlier a file on my desk with a sticky note.

One of the rooms has a woman I've been waiting for, but I didn't expect her up here this early.

We've chatted a few times over the years. I've always been partially fascinated with her.

I say partially because there's a combination of fascination and disgust.

She's not a woman you'd expect in here, but once you meet her and start listening to her story, it slowly dawns on you that there's nowhere else she should be.

She makes crazy sound normal, and it sucks you in.

I'd planned on popping in to see her about an hour ago, and yet, I haven't. Why? Not too sure.

She's been on my list for confessions. I know there's more to her story than we've been told, I just don't know what it would be.

She's not one you'll find by doing a fast Google search.

There may be a short paragraph about her on the inner pages of a newspaper if you can find it.

Yet, she's no different than any other serial killer out there. You'd think she'd be more famous because she's a woman, but nope, it's all hush-hush.

I 'think' I know why, but that's only because of little hints she's left during our brief conversations.

"Hey, Jack," Ike pokes his head into my office. "I'm heading down for lunch. Did you see...oh, you've got it." He points to the file in my hand. "She's ready for you, even asked to see you."

Ike's holding his lunch bag in hand.

"What did you bring today?"

"Spaghetti. Nothing fancy."

I glance down at the sub sandwich I'd brought in. Did I want to go join him, or should I go see her?

"Enjoy your lunch. Find out more about the lockdown and what started it, will you?"

Lockdowns happen more than you'd think, but it's rare for today's chaos to occur. From what I gathered, it was a perfect storm of being short-staffed and inmate tensions. One simple fight led to everyone letting loose. There were four deaths and way too many injured. The Warden is up to his balls in reports and reprimands.

I'll stay up here. I'll do my rounds, then visit her and see what she says.

I already have a feeling her story will be a good one.

By the time I make it toward her wing, things have calmed down on the floor, and all is quiet.

Well, relatively quiet. We've too many bodies for it to be silent.

Imagine standing in the middle of a hallway. There's a nasty waft of shit coming in one direction and the strong scent of bleach coming from another. In several rooms, you hear screaming, crying, moaning, and guttural groaning, but nothing that makes me pause. Everyone is medicated. Everyone is safe. Everyone needs to calm the shit down, but I can't say that can I?

My staff will take care of any needs while I visit with Karen.

Ahh, Karen. She's quite the girl. Sorry, I should say, woman, shouldn't I? She's in her late sixties, but she hasn't let herself go, not like others who come here.

She's bloody Martha Stewart in prison, except she's skinnier, meaner, and has more blood on her hands.

Karen is a good name for her, though. We all know a Karen, right? Or what society has deemed 'Karen' to be?

I've got my chair. I've got my coffee. I've got my interest to hear her story, but I am not sure there's anything else I need.

She looks at me in surprise when I open her door.

Whoever was in here, they took care of her real nice. She's got a blanket on her lap, the ties around her wrists are tight but not

restrictive, and I can see she's not about to go anywhere, considering her wheelchair is in the far corner.

The woman is paralyzed from the waist down. She and her roommate didn't get along too well, once upon a time. She got the wheelchair. Her roommate got cremated.

"Well, you're the last person I expected to see," Karen said as I pushed my chair in.

"Why's that?" I knew exactly why, but wondered if she remembered it the same way I did.

"Nothing. Just...nice to see you."

I snort. "Come on, Karen. You're dying. You're gonna play games like that now?"

She looks away, staring at her chair. "You're right. I've got nothing to lose, now do I? How did you figure it out?"

When she asks how I figured it out, she means, how did I figure out she tried to kill me?

Yep, you read that right.

I've had a few near-death experiences in my time here. She wasn't the first. She sure as hell wasn't the last, either.

"Oh, come on, Karen. I saw the murderous look in your eyes when I turned you down. You couldn't handle it, could you? I wasn't going to be another fuck on your fuck list."

She tsks at me. "Language, Jack. Language. It's not necessary, and that wasn't true. I was genuinely interested in you and thought we had something between us. I was obviously wrong, obviously hurt, and obviously went about expressing my feelings the wrong way. But let's make a deal, shall we? Since I tried to kill you once, it's only fair you do the same for me. Except, you'll actually be successful where I failed."

CHAPTER THREE

KAREN TO JACK

Yes, I remember that deal you made me years ago, back when I could walk. Back when you believed I had something to tell.

Do you still?

I was prettier back then, maybe that's why you made the deal. One lonely man wanting to connect with one lonely woman...you'd be surprised at the things that happen in this place. We could have had something Jack, well, back when I was prettier, we could have.

We almost did, didn't we? It wasn't all in my head, I know it wasn't. I caught your signals, I understood what you couldn't say.

Oh, don't bother lying to me. We both know there was something there between us. Why do you think I acted the way I did?

Sure, trying to get you killed was wrong. I'll admit that. I already told you I reacted based on feelings, and I apologized, didn't I?

Oh, come on now. Deny all you want, I know you found me hot. You have a thing for older women, don't you? Older women who are strong and confident, not the little mousey types that portray the need to be protected.

I've never lied to you. Don't lie to me, give me that decency, at least. I'm not pretty. Not like I used to be. I'm old and dying. But, I'll be dying on my terms and not whenever the good Lord decides it is my turn.

Does that surprise you, Jack? That I believe in God. It shouldn't.

I was raised to be a good Christian girl. Do unto others and all that. That's how I lived my life, and good or bad, it's why I'm here. God never said being a Christian would be easy, He just asks us to be faithful.

If anything, I've been faithful.

Well...to a point. Faithful in my belief, at least. A woman has needs, you know. There's no reason those needs can't be met, now is there?

So what surprised you?

Oh, was it that I'm not waiting for God to decide the time of my death?

I know the preacher downstairs says that nothing is ever in my control, that God is the weaver of time and chance, and if I'm meant to die tonight, then that is in God's timing and not mine. He believes that

there is nothing we can do to alter the plan God already has for us, but I don't believe that.

Do you?

Does he have a plan? Sure. Why not. Most parents do for their children, right? I bet your mom did. She thought you'd be a doctor or something prestigious, am I right?

Just because she had a plan for your life, doesn't mean you had to follow it.

Here's what I believe: the plan God has for me isn't one set in stone. It's always evolving, based on my choices. He may have a plan or a goal, but I'm the designer of my own fate, good or bad.

Who says being sent here was a bad thing?

Maybe I'm here because there was someone who needed me? Who needed to hear whatever it was that only I could say?

Who's to say that wasn't in God's plan. Right?

Whatever you believe, all I know is that I'm the one in control. Not God. Not the Warden. Not you.

Oh, you don't like that, do you? Why? We made a deal, and you don't go back on your word. So, if I want to die with no pain and if I want to die in my own time, then it's up to me, don't you think? I'm the one who decides if I accept that deal if I tell you the truth or not.

No one else.

See, I'm the one in control.

CHAPTER FOUR

KAREN

I was a good girl. A good Christian woman. A faithful wife, devout pew warmer, and willing volunteer. I was the type of woman who believed that good deeds pathed the way to the pearly gates.

I was so naive back then, wasn't I?

No, I don't believe that anymore. Good deeds only get you so far, but if you want to succeed in this life we're handed, sometimes you've got to play dirty.

Believe it or not, I was a different person then. You wouldn't recognize me, that's for sure.

My husband and I were at the church all the time, and I'm not exaggerating about that.

We were the custodians, the ones responsible for keeping up with its godly appearance. Slow hands, dirty dishes, mud on the carpet, and all that...it's not a good look.

I was there on a daily basis, helping out, keeping things tidy, and preparing for the different meetings that would go on, whereas Jeff came two times a week to do the deep cleaning.

Jeff had his own business as a church custodian and took care of several churches in the area, whereas I only kept our church tidy.

It was a fine life. Servitude has its own rewards, which I'm sure you know.

I was proud of my work. Proud of how clean I kept things. Proud of the thanks I received from everyone.

God doesn't like a proud heart, or so they say, but there's nothing wrong with taking pride in one's hard work.

We didn't have kids, that wasn't a blessing God bestowed on us. At the time, I thought it was a curse. What woman wants to be childless?

Now, I'm glad.

Glad I didn't have children with that man.

Glad I'm not a mother in this place with children out there, on their own.

It's a burden, being a mother and being incarcerated here.

Knowing your children are out there, experiencing life without your guidance. At least, that's what I've been told.

Not being a mother meant I had a lot of extra time on my hands, compared to those with children. That's what the pastor's wife always said to me. It's why she'd ask me to help out with meetings, or take care of organizing donations for the food drive or a local shelter, or spend extra time cleaning up after the evening groups... because the other women were busy making their families their priority.

Do you know what I'd love to say to that woman now?

Fuck you.

Crass, yes, I realize that. I don't believe foul mouths are necessary to get a point across, but in this case...can you imagine the look on her face if I had sworn at her?

She was a nasty piece too, so she would have deserved it. Mrs. High and Mighty, I'm better than you, Princess with a wishbone up her ass...that was her.

The preacher and his wife showed up at my hearing. He was always a good man. He had the misfortune of marrying a strong woman. Normally, I wouldn't say that was a bad thing, but when it comes to being pastors and all that, well, the woman needed to know her place. She needed to understand what it meant to be meek and mild and not be the one wearing the pants in the family.

While he said he'd be praying for me, you know what she did?

She spat in my face.

Don't worry. I didn't react. I knew everyone was watching me. I did the right thing. The polite thing. The good Christian woman thing. I calmly wiped my face and told her I'd be praying for her.

You should have seen it, Jack. Her face turned a deep shade of crimson, and she sputtered for a reply but wasn't given time for one. Her husband led her away from me, which was the smart thing to do.

I mean...she was so close I could have reacted. I could have hurt her if I'd wanted to. What would they have done to me? I was already headed here...

I can see you're getting bored with me. What does all of this have to do with my story? Well, now, I have no idea. They're just words I need to say, you know?

This is my story, and I'll tell it how I please. The last thing I'm going to let happen is a man dictate the end of my life, do you hear

me?

CHAPTER FIVE

KAREN TO JACK

Oh, it's fine, get your panties out of your ass.

I'll tell you my story. A promise is a promise.

I'll tell you about Jeff, about the man I fell in love with.

I'll explain why I'm here and how I have no regrets.

Don't you worry your little head about any of that.

But first, can we talk about us?

Yes, us. You and me. We had something, didn't we?

Fine, fine, yes, I tried to kill you. How many times do we need to go over that?

I already apologized. Already said I regret my reaction. Can we move past that and get to the truth behind things?

Why did you turn me away? Why didn't you take me up on my offer? You know, we wouldn't have gotten caught, and everyone would have turned a blind eye...they do it all the time. It's not like us having a relationship was a bad thing.

Oh, come on, don't tell me a man like you cares about rules.

Everyone in here does it. Well...they did. Not so much anymore, but we blame that on you.

For a man who has a clean conscience about killing people, you have this thing about staff and inmates having personal relationships, don't you?

I don't get it.

Actually, no one gets it. Who do you think you are to force other staff to follow your own insane morality clauses?

I realize it does me no good anymore, but there are needy women down there, Jack. Needy women who would give anything for a chance at some alone time with you.

Is that so wrong?

What? This tattoo? What about it?

[Jack here: In my attempt to turn the conversation, I notice a tattoo on the side of her neck. I've noticed it before but always assumed it was a bruise or something. Now that she's lying here, and I've got a clear view

of her skin, I can see it's not a bruise, but a poorly inked tatt.]

I don't know if I want to tell you about it. It's kind of personal. I got it before I came in here, during my killing spree, I guess you could say. This here proves I am who I say I am, and I've done what I said I've done.

Come to think of it, you could have one too, Jack. Considering...

That's all I'm going to tell you. You've got to earn one of these and then be brought in, but you lost any chance years ago when you turned me down.

Sure, I'm being petty. But petty is all I've got at this point.

CHAPTER SIX

KAREN

Jeff. I like talking about it and haven't done it in a good long while.

That man of mine, he was a man of few words.

He was like that when we met. He remained like that all throughout our marriage.

He was the strong, silent type.

My Jeff, he wasn't all that handsome. He was tall, lean, and had curly hair he refused to let me cut. Every so often, he'd go to the barber and get a trim, but that hair of his was longer than mine and either in a ponytail or a braid down his back. I liked it, though. He was everything my own father wasn't, and he was nothing like the man my father wanted me to be with.

But Jeff, he loved God.

He treated me well.

That's what mattered.

There's not really a way for me to describe our marriage without it seeming boring. Back then, it wasn't so much about all the showcasing and professing about love. We didn't have time for that.

Times were hard. Life was hard. Even without kids, Jeff worked his butt off to keep a roof over our heads and food on our table.

I respected him. He took care of me.

That's what love looked like for us.

I believed we'd grow old together. We'd sit in our respective chairs, him watching television while I read or knitted, we'd sit in silence that was comfortable until it was time for bed.

Don't most people want to grow old like that?

It wasn't something we talked about, though. Our conversations had more to do with what our plans were for the day, what things I needed to pick up, and him listening to me share the latest gossip from church.

He was a great listener, that's for sure.

Don't get me wrong, I loved Jeff. He loved me. That was never in doubt. But marriage is more than just a feeling of love or being in love. You young kids, you chase after that feeling, believing it's the

magic to a long and lasting relationship.

You couldn't be more wrong.

The secret to a solid relationship is one built on respect and need.

Men, they need to be respected. They need to know that what they're doing is appreciated and seen. They need to know that all their sacrifice is noticed.

Women, we need to be protected and cared for. We need to know that we have someone to catch us when we fall, someone to watch our back, stand by our side, and protect us when we can't protect ourselves. I'm not saying we can't do it ourselves, I'm saying we need to know that someone is there to help us when we get tired of doing it all ourselves. Make sense?

That's what Jeff and I had between us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KAREN TO JACK

I'm not here to give you a lesson in relationships. God knows mine wasn't perfect.

But back then, I thought what we had was enough.

That's what I'm trying to get across.

No one knows something is broken at first. And most things don't break at once. It happens in steps, little chips here and there, fissures, wedges...you don't realize the damage of what's to come in the beginning.

That's how it was for me and Jeff.

I knew we didn't have a perfect relationship, but I thought it was solid.

I wasn't the type to vent to my girlfriends about Jeff. I didn't need to bitch about him over coffee, and I sure wasn't going to ask others to pray for us. Those prayer groups are fodder for gossip.

Tell me I'm not wrong.

You can't because I know I'm right.

Listen, I went to enough prayer groups while at the church that I know what I'm talking about.

Oh, it might seem all innocent, but when the women in a church tell you they will lift you in prayer, they're fully expecting you to give them all the details about why they're praying.

If you don't, they'll come up with all sorts of imagined things, and those imagined things will get whispered around to everyone.

Prayer chains are pure gossip chains.

Do you know how those things work? You ask either the minister or someone in charge for prayer. They call whoever is in charge of the prayer chain, who then will call everyone on a list. But they don't just call and say 'so and so needs prayer for her son who is in the hospital'. Oh no...they might start off with that, but then someone will ask, why is he in the hospital, and that's when the gossip starts...they'll start attacking both the son and the mother asking for prayer, blaming anything on how he was raised or the life they live or the sin that has to be in that family.

I know because I was on that prayer chain, and I heard all the insinuations as well as the requests.

Jeff once told me never to ask for prayer on those things. He said if I needed prayer, that it was enough for us as a couple to bend our knees, and God knows and hears everything. We don't need the mass to pray for us, we just need God to hear us, and He always hears.

My husband was a wise man.

For the most part.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KAREN

I can look back on my life and pinpoint the day everything changed.

Funny how that happens, don't you think?

It was a Tuesday, and I arrived early at the church in order to get one of the meeting rooms ready.

It was a usual Tuesday morning, no one was there when I first arrived, so after Jeff dropped me off, I let myself in, turned on all the lights, and headed to the basement.

The basement was where all the meeting rooms were located. They were the same rooms used for Sunday school too.

That day, the ladies were gathering for their weekly bible study, but the plan was to also discuss an upcoming weekend retreat.

I never went to those retreats. They were costly, and we didn't have the extra funds to throw around for something like that, so while I always listened and imagined I was going, the reality was, I waited around for everyone to leave so I could tidy up.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I was always asked to go, but I think it was an act of kindness, and not a genuine request. Sure, I was a member of the church just like all the other ladies, but I was also the help...so regardless of what was said to my face, behind my back, they didn't see me as equal.

I was used to it, truth be told.

I had a surprise that day, though.

I'd casually mentioned the retreat weekend to Jeff, and he told me I should go.

Color me surprised because I definitely was.

I think I shocked most of the ladies when, at the end of the meeting, they asked who all was planning to attend, and I raised my hand. It was a good kind of shock, you know? At least, I thought it was. It felt like that at the time.

I volunteered to help as much as I could, in whatever capacity they needed, because that's what a good Christian woman did, she served wherever there was a need. I was in charge of the food, and I

had a few ladies help me with meal planning, prep, and making the meals.

I guess this was an area no one really liked to volunteer for ... they went away for the weekend to relax, not to work, but I was so excited, it didn't matter to me.

Jeff and I rarely traveled anywhere. We went to Niagara Falls for our anniversary, and that was the farthest we'd ever been from home, so the retreat was a treat for me, even if I had to spend a lot of the time in the kitchen.

Now, let me be clear, I had no idea what to expect on this retreat. They'd booked a retreat center that had cabins where you shared a room with someone, or you could pay extra for your own room. Each cabin had a little kitchenette area, a common area where you could sit around a fire, and a shared bathroom. The retreat center itself was quite large. There was a main common room, with plenty of seating area, smaller meeting rooms, a spa center complete with a pool, hot tub, and sauna, and then a kitchen.

You could pay extra for the staff there to prepare your meals, or you could take care of that yourself.

The ladies had been to this location several times, and as much as they loved having the meals prepared for them, they figured they could save money and take care of it themselves. They would either have one person be in charge of the meals or several women would volunteer to take turns cooking. Everyone provided the necessary food, where a list would be passed around, and they would check off what items they'd bring once a meal plan had been created.

I should have kept quiet and let them do their thing, their thing being that everyone took turns, but no, I was so excited, volunteering to take care of the meal prep, shopping, and creating was an opportunity I jumped at.

I never quite felt like I fit in. I was the help, and always felt the need to prove my worthiness. If I had to do things all over again, I would change so much. The more you give, the more people take... that's a hard lesson for some to learn. It was for me.

Taking care of the meals meant I missed out on several sessions of that retreat. I had to leave some of the classes early, or couldn't go out and shop or spend time in the spa because I needed to prepare for another meal. Some of the ladies offered to fill in for me so that I could do some fun things, but I felt bad...just because I

couldn't enjoy it didn't mean someone else had to suffer alongside me, right?

Plus, during the trip, I was told that someone had already paid my fees, meaning this was a free trip. Who that person was, I had no idea. Well, I didn't know at the time.

No, it wasn't Jeff.

At the time, I thought it was a Good Samaritan, and I didn't question it.

So when did everything change for me?

It was during an afternoon at this retreat. I was in the kitchen, going through the menu for that night when a few of the ladies walked in looking for some coffee. I offered to make them a fresh batch plus something to snack on.

They sat out in the main common room, one on a couch, the other in one of those comfy chairs you could sink in, their backs to me.

They were deep in conversation, and I didn't want to interrupt, so I held back a bit, waiting for a break when I could step in.

I shouldn't have waited. I should have just made my presence known, placed the tray down on the table, and left.

I wish I had done that. Maybe my life would be different. Maybe I wouldn't be here, with you being the last face I see.

Maybes are just wishes, and we all know how wasteful wishes are.

CHAPTER NINE

KAREN TO JACK

You wish for things, right Jack?

Like, even now...you're probably wishing to be out of this room and back doing whatever it is you do during your shifts.

Me, I'm always wishing.

My wishes never come true, but I wish, still the same.

Ever since I was a kid, I wished to be part of a group, you know? Accepted, acknowledged, be someone people wanted to be friends with, instead of someone people could use.

I was an ugly duckling, you could say, as a kid. Once I hit puberty, especially when it came to high school, well...I wasn't beautiful by any means, but I was nice to look at.

All I wanted was to be part of a group - and that's never really changed.

Well, I guess it has now, the older I get, the more I realize individuality is priceless and being in a group only secludes you from the real world.

At the church, I wanted to be part of a group too. I wanted it badly, and I found myself doing things, agreeing to things, and saying things that were out of character, just so those snobby, holier-than-your-ass women would accept me.

I'm ashamed of it now.

I didn't do that in here. No sir-y. See, I figured something out.

The more you don't care, the more others are attracted.

That's where I went wrong with you, isn't it? I cared too much. I showed my hand too early.

Don't give me that look, young man.

The least you can do is admit to what was between us. Who's going to know at this stage of the game, Jack?

CHAPTER TEN

KAREN

School wasn't easy for me, not by a long shot. I never had boyfriends growing up.

I also never really had any best friends.

The group I hung out with, we were basically the outcasts of the school. You know, the nerds, the geeks, the uglies. We weren't friends, but we hung together out of necessity. It's safe to say I didn't have any boyfriends.

In fact, Jeff was my first, and we ended up getting married.

I met him during my last year of school. I was working in a local bakery cutting and bagging bread and serving customers, you know, the usual high school teen job. Jeff came in one day to pick up an order for his mother and waited for me after work.

He asked if he could walk me home, and that was that.

He was a few years older than me, so we kept our budding love a secret from our parents, at least until I was out of school.

Unlike other kids at school, I wasn't destined for college.

My parents were rich. We scraped by with what we had, and they worked hard. That's what I was raised to do as well.

So, fresh out of school, while everyone else went off to college, I stayed home and found a full-time job.

Little by little, Jeff started coming around more. My mom thought I could do better. My father...well, he knew Jeff's parents and knew he'd support me as a husband. The faster I was out of their house, the better, as far as my dear dad was concerned.

Mom, I think she just wanted me to find some semblance of happiness, you know?

Focus on the Lord, she'd always say. Focus on Him, and He'll direct your path. That's where your happiness lies, good child.

Kids learn by example, right? I learned that marriage has nothing to do with love and everything to do with security.

So when Jeff asked me to marry him, I didn't hesitate.

Would it have been nice to marry for love? Maybe. But you don't know what you don't know, and I had no idea what real, true,

passionate love could do in a relationship.

Bottom line, since I know you're getting bored, I was content with my lot in life because I knew I'd never get anything better.

That didn't mean I stopped wishing. Oh no, I kept that wish for being accepted going. Even made it a daily prayer.

So, while in the church, I did whatever I could to be accepted, and if it meant cleaning up after everyone so they could chit-chat away, then that's what I did.

I was happy with the throwaway smiles and comments, with the irregular thank-you's and little gifts I know they received from others but didn't like.

I was happy with all that because it meant I was being noticed.

So...when I overheard those ladies say my name during that weekend retreat, my initial reaction was to pause. It was pure shock when I heard them utter my name.

I remember that moment, even now, with so much clarity. It's etched into my brain because that's when everything changed for me. There was no gradual adjustment of my mindset, it was instantaneous.

They called me Poor Karen. Poor Karen for being so plain looking. Poor Karen for not having what it takes to keep my husband faithful. Poor Karen because it was all my fault my husband was sinning.

My fault. Can you believe that?

I did. I believed it.

Turns out, my husband was having an affair with a woman from the church...the same woman who normally always came to these retreats but couldn't this time. The same woman he'd been sleeping with for close to six months.

Six months.

The guilt of my husband's sin was heavy, but I wouldn't let the women know that.

It took a few minutes before I remembered what I was doing. I marched into that great room, placed the coffee and treats down on the table with a smile, and returned to the kitchen.

The rest of the weekend, I served the women with a smile, pretending I didn't notice their glances, ignoring the whispered gossip that slowly increased throughout the weekend.

While I pretended and ignored their words, I plotted.

Now, before that weekend, I was a meek woman. There wasn't a

violent bone in my body, or so I thought.

But after that, all I could think about was killing the woman who seduced my husband. How dare she. How dare she cause my husband to sin like that. She was Lilith personified, and in her sin, I was reborn.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAREN TO JACK

There's a freedom in being reborn, Jack, that you can't understand unless it happens to you personally.

I'll try to explain: it was like my whole life I'd been under a shadow, a shadow that weighed me down until I was on my hands and knees, a burden over my neck that forced my head down, my gaze on the ground, instead of upwards.

That weight was gone. I was standing firm on my two feet, my gaze forward, and whatever shame I felt before finally disappeared.

I have never and will never apologize for my actions after finding out that my husband was having an affair. Why should I? I was only taking action, cleaning my house.

I never blamed Jeff. How could I? That wasn't how things were back then. The poor man obviously wasn't getting his needs met, and that was on me.

I can't tell you the guilt and shame I felt from that. That was my duty as his wife, and I'd failed.

After that weekend, I was determined to fix that mistake.

If my husband needed a mistress, then I'd be that for him. If my husband needed to be seduced, then seduce him, I would. It's what God wanted, after all.

There are countless verses in the bible that speaks to a woman and her responsibility to meet her husband's needs. First Corinthians. Proverbs. Ephesians.

Wives, be willing to submit to your husband. Serve his needs as unto the Lord.

It was clear to me I'd failed, but that was about to change.

The first thing I needed to do was get rid of the temptation. The next thing I needed to do was satisfy Jeff in ways I never had before. I didn't realize his need for sex was so great - our sex life, until that point, barely existed other than the occasional rut on a Friday night.

No longer was I going to be Poor Karen. No longer was I going to focus on serving the needs of the women in the church.

If I was going to be on my knees, it would be servicing my husband.

Oh...I see that look, Jack.

You're realizing just how much you missed when you turned me away, aren't you?

CHAPTER TWELVE

KAREN

Being a cleaner meant I had access to a lot of lethal products.

Guess you could say my husband bought the supplies that I used to take out my competition.

I thought long and hard about what I was going to do and how I was going to do it.

I even spent some time in prayer about it.

The Bible is a violent book, did you realize that? The God we serve, He's not always loving and kind. He's the jealous type, and there's a lot we can learn from that.

I know I did.

During my prayers, I asked Him to tell me to stop if what I was about to do was wrong.

Never once did I feel like I was about to sin.

Never once did I feel like what I was about to do was wrong and unforgivable.

God didn't say no, so I took that as a yes.

Crystal, that's the name of the sinful seductress, she was there to greet everyone when we returned from the weekend away. I was rarely ever on her radar, she barely spoke two words to me unless she needed me to do something, but that day, she was there with a smile, thanked me for helping out, and even put her hand on my arm and gave it a slight squeeze.

The woman touched me for the first time in years. Before that weekend, I wouldn't have thought anything of it - in fact, I probably would have been so happy that she even saw me, talked to me, and touched me to think twice about the action.

Those women who'd been gossiping...they noticed it too. I caught the way they watched the two of us, like they were expecting something to happen - but I kept my cool, and played dumb.

Playing dumb was an act I was good at.

I went home with the focus of fixing my marriage.

I tried to sleep with my husband that first night, but he was too

tired from work.

I tried the next night, and the next.

Then I went out and bought lingerie. That seemed to help.

At church, I'd smile sweetly at Crystal, knowing she wasn't having sex with my husband because I was, and if that wasn't the perfect revenge, I didn't know what was. I'd even thought about not making her pay for what she'd done, in how she's tried to destroy my marriage, but then Jeff started coming home late again like before, and he stopped being interested in me, again.

I wasn't okay with that.

Each month, the women's bible study held a lunch, and I'd get women to volunteer to bring food items. There were three of us who always made different desserts.

For this one lunch, I decided to bring cupcakes.

Let me paint the scene for you.

We ate buffet style, where everyone came up to the main tables and picked out what they wanted to eat. Then they'd return to their seats, where their purses and coats hung over their chairs.

I noticed something when Crystal first walked in - how she had a new purse, the same new purse that I had, that was given to me as a surprise gift from Jeff. What were the odds?

While the women were up at the buffet tables, I switched Crystal's bag with mine. I didn't have much in mine - church keys, a little notebook I used to keep track of what I needed to do, a personal calendar, and a change purse.

I waited to see if the woman would realize she had the wrong purse, but she never did.

If she had, it might have saved her life.

Oh...now you're interested, aren't you?

Crystal was my first victim that no one knew about...now you do.

The moment I brought out the desserts, the women flocked to the table, as they normally did. The pastor's wife always prayed that God would take the calories away from the treats we brought, and the women would always indulge, never leaving any leftovers to take home.

On the table were three different types of desserts, but I was the only one to bring a homemade item. The other ladies had picked up something from a bakery or the local grocery store, as I knew they would when I selected them to bring the desserts.

Of course, my cupcakes were a hit, as I knew they would be.

When Crystal approached, I leaned forward and spoke to her quietly. I said something about her outfit or something ridiculous. All I wanted from her was a smile and acknowledgment, and I got it. She said thank you, loud enough for others to hear, and that's all that mattered.

The woman had a sweet tooth, and she took a piece of all the desserts, as I figured she would.

I didn't care what she ate, as long as she ate what I had brought.

I kept an eye on Crystal, and the smile on my face grew as she basically inhaled my cupcake.

It didn't take her long to head to the bathroom, and she did so just as the senior pastor's wife started to make her announcements.

The pastor's wife had this thing about people leaving their seats while she spoke - she didn't like it and felt it's rude, especially if people knew she was about to lead them in prayer, so it was only Crystal who sneaked out.

With my purse.

The whole time she was gone, I had to force myself to remain at my post in the kitchen. I was tidying up, being as quiet as a mouse so as not to interrupt the meeting, but I couldn't stop from looking out toward the hall where the bathroom was located.

At worst, Crystal would call out for help.

At best, no one would realize she was missing until it was too late.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KAREN TO JACK

Remember that thing about wishes, Jack?

Well, my wish came true that day, that's for sure.

Don't tell me to stop smiling...that's a memory I've held onto for years, and it's always brought me happiness.

See, there was something I knew about Crystal that I never let on about.

The woman was allergic to nuts.

Now, this was back when nut allergies weren't a thing for most people. But I knew.

Once, when I was making up a menu for an event at the church, I asked if there were any allergies. Some couldn't do shellfish. Crystal was the only one who mentioned nuts.

So how does that explain things?

Well...when it came to baking, I liked to try new recipes. I'd run out of flour when I had to make those cupcakes, but I had this huge bag of almonds, and in one of my cookbooks, it talked about how to make your own almond flour.

So that's what I did.

It wasn't up to me to tell Crystal she should be careful of the things she ate, was it?

I mean...if I was allergic to something, I'd be asking the questions.

Why did I change purses?

Well, I knew she had one of those needles in her purse in case she had an allergic reaction to something. I saw her pull it out once and mention it to one of the other ladies.

Are you putting two and two together now?

She was found dead in the bathroom about halfway through the meeting.

Not by me, no sir. I was busy in the kitchen washing dishes.

The emergency services were called. The police asked around, and even came into the kitchen to chat with me.

They asked why Crystal would have had my purse. I made a comment about, 'oh my goodness, we have the same one'. I lied and said

she'd come into the kitchen when she'd first arrived to drop off a casserole, and she must have put her purse down and taken mine by accident. I pointed over to the small table where a few of us had our purses, so it, of course, seemed plausible.

I made a show of instant regret, pretending to realize that mistake on her part is what caused her death, and I had almost everyone come to comfort me, being sure to tell me it wasn't my fault.

When someone mentioned her allergy, I admitted that I'd brought the cupcakes, but almost mentioned that I'd told Crystal at the table. Another woman confirmed that she'd seen me tell Crystal, even hearing her say thank you, so again, I was off scot-free.

I made sure to be extra kind to Jeff that night. The man was a good actor, that's for sure. When I told him about Crystal's death, he never once let on that he had a personal relationship with her. He did however stay up that night watching television and I let him be.

It was the least I could do.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

KAREN

I wish I could say our relationship got back on track after that point, but it didn't.

I tried my best to seduce my husband, but I'll be honest, I wasn't all that good at it. All I knew was missionary style, and I could tell that never really seemed to excite Jeff that much.

I read this one book where it advised wives to do all they could to be attractive to their husbands, and I was trying, I was trying really hard.

One of Jeff's cleaning contracts was for one of those sinful dens you find in cities. Stripper bars and such. He kept that part of his work quiet, we really didn't want people to know too much about that. He went there early in the mornings, when the place was closed, and no one was around.

Sometimes he'd make comments about seeing people there, talking with some of the girls or the boss and such.

I never once worried about him being a frequent visitor there, but then I never thought he'd be the type of man to cheat, either.

I did a bold thing. I visited that club one afternoon. I figured the place wouldn't be too busy, and I was right. A few of the women were there, setting things up, getting ready for the dinner crowd. When I introduced myself as Jeff's wife, a few of them gave me some odd looks.

They didn't want any trouble, they said.

I wasn't there to cause trouble. I was there to find out if my husband was cheating on me with those sluts.

Turns out, he was.

Crystal wasn't the only woman my husband had been sleeping with. I'd been failing him for a long time, and I carried that hard on my conscious.

One of the women - I think her name was Brandy or something like that, Brittany, maybe? Anyway, she pulled me aside and said they didn't want any problems, that Jeff was the best cleaner they've had, and they'd like to keep him.

I told her I wasn't there to cause problems, I just wanted to know if my husband did anything other than just clean.

Turns out - he did. He liked to watch the girls with their clients, and since he made sure they always had a clean place to work, they let him watch every so often.

She then told me that it was none of the women's fault if my husband wasn't faithful.

I stood there, shocked. My poor little Christian mindset was getting blown out of the water. She made sure that I knew my husband had a thing for being submissive and that being dominant was a turn-off for him. She said if I didn't want him to find satisfaction elsewhere, then I needed to step up. She even casually mentioned he liked to be blindfolded and tied down.

I wanted to get sick. I almost did.

Those terms were new to me. Submission. Dominant. It all meant one thing to me...sinful sex, and apparently, that was something my husband was into.

My husband. With submissive tendencies.

Everything she told me went against every fiber of my moral compass.

What a fool I was.

The church likes to keep the women beneath their feet. They like to promote the fallacy that women are less than, that the man needed to be in charge and in control, and anything sexual was sinful.

Fuck that shit, Jack.

I love God. I do not love the condemnation women receive from the church. That's one freedom that was given to me when I came here.

Imagine that...most of my freedoms were taken from me when I arrived, except for that one.

I would like to tell you that I went crazy after this. That I lost all sense of sanity and became a different person, but if I told you that, I'd be lying.

Inside I was a mess, but on the outside, I was the perfect Christian, the darling housewife, the submissive servant to the church.

First thing I did was I kept track of my husband's schedule.

Those 'late nights working' lies were ridiculous once my eyes were open.

He wasn't working. He was fucking.

I'd sit in my car at night, a blanket tucked around my legs, a thermos of hot coffee by my side, and I'd watch for my husband. He parked in the back of that sex slum, but I could see everything.

When the women were out there having their break, he'd join them. He'd take them to his truck, and well...you can imagine what went on in there.

The women, it was very clear to me who was in charge.

At the time, it disgusted me, but looking back, that wasn't right.

I wasn't disgusted. I was...intrigued. Even turned on. I found I liked watching. Sure, at first, I claimed it was because I needed proof of what was happening, but the reality of it was that I just liked watching it.

I took the knowledge of what I knew home, and little by little, I started to take control. Instead of asking my husband to make love to me, instead of waiting for him to show me interest, I told him what I wanted and didn't take no for an answer.

It took a little for him to come around, but he did eventually.

He liked it.

For a bit, he stopped working late at night.

That was nice.

All good things never remain, though. I think he just liked having the affairs, the danger of getting caught was exciting for him.

So I caught him.

One night, he pulled over to the side of a street and invited a hooker to join him in his truck. I followed, parked on the side of the road, and watched as he pulled into a parking lot. I waited until I was sure they were almost done, and then I pulled up beside him.

He didn't even notice me.

I opened the trunk, took out a cloth, doused it, and walked over to his truck.

One little knock on the door. One guilty-ass look of shock. One roll down of the window.

That's all I needed. I reached in, pushed that rag on the bitches face, and held her there.

I was stronger than I let on, and even her trying to tear at my hands did nothing.

Eventually, Jeff held her hands down.

When she was dead, I told him to go park behind the big

department store, by the garbage bins.

He then helped me dump her in the trash and followed me home.

We had the best sex that night of our whole marriage.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KAREN TO JACK

Do you know the total number of hookers I killed?

Oh, I know what's in the file. I know what they accused me of at my hearing, but do you know the real total?

It's more than what they claim, let's put it that way.

I'm not going to tell you how many, that's between me and Jeff.

Oh, that surprised you, huh?

Jeff was there for every single murder. Funny how he wasn't the one charged, though.

He's dead now. Died a good number of years ago from an STD. It's his own fault.

I offered him the sex of a lifetime. I gave him all I had. I became the slut to make my husband satisfied in our marriage bed, but it wasn't enough.

There are some women in here who hate being in this place. They claim they're innocent, that their lives were destroyed by being sent here.

Not me.

I found myself here.

I found sexual satisfaction - even if it wasn't with you.

I found a sense of freedom in finally being able to believe what I want without someone else shoving their truth down my throat.

Some call the Asylum a hell hole. I say, it is what you make it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KAREN

Jeff and I, we continued to clean churches.

We continued to live the lives people expected of us.

And once a week, we gave in to our own depravity and went for a ride.

Jeff picked up a hooker and got a nice blow job.

I met him, and we took out the trash after.

A few times, I joined in, and we had a fun threesome.

We didn't start doing that until after Jeff landed a cleaning contract with a local motel. The place was run down and one of the 'charge by the hour' type places.

He'd be there cleaning, I'd find someone to play with, and he'd be waiting in a room for us. It was always the same room, the very last one at the end of the row. That room had two doors - one that led into the back alley and one beside the green garbage bin.

Threesomes, they can be fun. I enjoy women, as much as I enjoy men, but I enjoyed the look on Jeff's face more than anything. He was really into watching the action between two women, rather than getting involved.

Don't get me wrong, he got involved, but he liked to watch first. I never let him fuck the other woman, though, not when I was there. He'd fuck me while I got her off, and then together, they both made sure I got off too. It was a win-win for everyone.

Well, it was a win-lose for her, that's for sure.

We'd kill them a few ways. I was never one for the blood - we sliced a few throats, but it made too much of a mess to clean. I liked the lethal gas way, or even pouring chemicals down their throat after knocking them out.

They all ended up in the trash, though, covered by mounds of other trash and never discovered.

It was something stupid that got me caught.

Jeff was mad at me about my tattoo. He hated that I got it on my neck, that it was visible to anyone to see.

It wasn't. It's close to the back of my neck and always covered

by my hair, and when I was at the church, I wore a scarf to make sure it remained hidden.

He was jealous, truth be told. Jealous that I got the tattoo and not him. Jealous that I'd been sought out while he was ignored.

And that's all I'm going to say about it. We had a fight, and I stomped out of the house while he sat there watching football.

Being angry, there was a lot I could have done. Or even should have done.

I could have gone shopping. I should have gone to the church.

Instead, I broke the rules: I went out on my own.

I decided to have a little fun on my own, but I picked up the wrong woman.

Turns out she was a cop. She didn't tell me that for the longest time. I think I surprised her when I picked her up, and she assumed I was picking her up for someone else.

If I'd been thinking, that's exactly what I should have done. I should have driven to the motel and told her to go to one of the rooms and hightailed it out as fast as I could.

I didn't.

I had a little kit on the floor of the backseat. She saw it. She got curious. I thought I could outsmart her and knock her out before things got out of hand, but damn, she was stronger than me.

She pulled out a pair of handcuffs from her bra and slapped them on me faster than I thought possible.

I called Jeff from the police station, but he never came to see me.

They pulled him in for questioning, and he gave them the story of a lifetime.

Turns out my husband was a good liar. Managed to convince everyone he had no idea what I was doing, that he thought I'd taken some jobs to help out, and even produced a calendar where I'd kept track of all my kills.

A normal person would be angry. A normal person would be horrified and mortified and feel abandoned.

I think we both know I'm not normal.

Once, I'd told him that if we were ever caught, to play dumb. My Jeff, he was a weak man, and he wouldn't have survived in here.

He would have broke, whereas this place only made me stronger.

Amazing how that works, don't you think?

I guess women are the stronger sex after all.

Hey, Jack? Do you think I'll have use of my legs again in heaven? Sure, would be nice to walk around, you know?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

Karen was a piece of work.

That girl knew how to spin a yarn.

She was a strong woman, physically and mentally. There was this inner strength about her that not many in this place have.

Didn't mean I liked her.

Sure as hell didn't mean I was attracted to her.

Before I left her side, I sketched out the tattoo I'd seen. There was something about it, something that caught my interest. No idea what I'll do with it. Maybe I'll show it to Ike and see if he knows more to the story of the tat.

Karen, she died in the early morning hours.

I wheeled her chair out into the hallway when all was said and done. I left it by the nurse's station, and it stayed there for two whole shifts before someone took it downstairs.

The woman believed she was headed for heaven. She also believed she was going to walk again.

Listen - I'm not here to say where a person goes after death, nor am I going to judge anyone for their actions, but if heaven opens its doors for her...

PATIENT: CLINTON

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Chiffon and Natasha for helping name those in this confession

CHAPTER ONE

Color. It's a simple concept that we take for granted.

Apparently, there are over one million shades of colors, and we're the assholes who take that for granted - or so I've been told.

We see the crystal blue lake and think nothing of how vibrant the colors are, we just know that it's a nice blue. The grass we walk on, we can tell if it's dry or not just by the color we see.

When women ask if a color looks good on them, they really want to know if the shades flatters their skin tone (again, so I've been told).

More men than women are color blind. I know, I know, it's a deficiency that affects all, but it's like one in twelve men are color blind, whereas one in two hundred women are.

It's usually genetic but can be a medical thing, but for this patient, he was born that way.

In fact, he's one of the rare cases who can't see color at all.

He's got a condition called achromatopsia, and all he sees are shades of grey.

Personally, I couldn't imagine only seeing grey. Sure, I like black, the majority of my closet consists of black t-shirts, hoodies, and sweaters, but I like to toss in the occasional red in the mix, you know?

I'm not a Neanderthal where I don't appreciate color, but until I met Clint, I never really thought about it much.

Yes, I'm that asshole who takes it for granted.

Don't you?

Here's the thing about Clint. Occasionally he can see one specific color.

I say occasionally because it's situationally dependent.

As you read his confession, you'll understand what I mean.

Another thing about Clint: he's actually a good guy. If I'd met him down at the bar, I'd have no problem chatting with him. In fact, I'd have no problem spending a Sunday down at the local fishpond with him.

If you were to meet him, you'd take one look at the tat sleeves on his arms and instinctively step back, but then you'd look him in

the eyes and realize he's not too bad. Until you stare too long in his eyes and realize he's on the edge of wanting to plunge a knife into you just to see you bleed.

Like I said - I'd have no problem chatting with him or fishing together down at the pond - but you can be damn sure I always keep him in my line of sight.

CHAPTER TWO

There's a vibe in the air, a low hum that sets your teeth on edge and raises the hair on the back of your neck.

Everyone is tense. It's unavoidable after the shift we've just had.

I know for a fact there isn't one person on my crew that can't wait to leave the property, and the countdown for most of them is on.

I won't be leaving. Not for a long while.

We have a patient on the floor that has been a bit of a... problem.

Normally he's not too bad, but then, normally, he's heavily medicated.

I say normally because there is nothing normal about the situation we are in.

There's also nothing normal about death, and this patient is dying.

Right now, we've got a guard posted in his room while I deal with a newbie who got injured on the job.

He's already had a spanking from the Warden for what happened, so as much as I want to add my own two cents in, now is not the time.

Sure, he screwed up. It's not like he doesn't know it, though. Sometimes lessons are tough to learn, but you can bet your ass this kid learned his.

You're probably wondering what happened, right?

Nothing bad. The kid got sloppy. It was one of those cascading events where one thing led to another, then another until it ended with him getting slashed in the arm because he wasn't paying attention.

He's fine. Don't worry about him. It's more his pride than anything else.

"It's about time you got your first showpiece." Ike is standing in front of the kid, with his arms crossed over his massive chest. He's not frowning, though. I hope the kid realizes that's a good thing.

"Showpiece?"

Ike lifts his shirt and shows the scars across his abdomen, then

points to the ones hidden beneath his tattoos.

"We've all got them. Some," he gives me the side eye, "more than others."

"That's 'cause I've been here longer than you, you dipshit." My mumbling is gruff, but Ike knows better than to take it personally.

"Point is, shit happens. If you learn from it, you'll do fine. If it happens again because you were sloppy, you don't belong here. And if you can't handle it on this floor..." Ike shakes his head as he leans back against the wall.

"Fuck, if you can't handle this floor, you might as well just quit and go work in a doctor's office weighing babies." I pick up a mug and take a mouthful of cold coffee.

I've tried numerous times to drink that shit while it was hot, but it's not going to happen. Not this shift at least.

"So, what did we learn from today?" I stare point blank at the kid, not giving him any help.

"Even if they're close to death's door, these patients can be assholes," the kid says.

Ike snorts in laughter while I attempt to swallow my smile.

"Don't let them fool you. The only time you can take your eye off them is when they're dead. Don't assume someone is sleeping, either, or that they've taken their medications unless you personally see them take it."

The kid nods his head. "Point taken."

Ike takes the kid out of my office just as my phone rings.

The Warden. Fuck. I've already had a chat with him and walked away feeling like I'd gotten kicked in the ass. I know what he's going to say, it's going to be the same thing he said to me earlier, but if I don't answer the call, he'll be up here demanding to know why, and that's the last thing I want.

"Jack, here."

"What the fuck is wrong with you today? You normally have a solid grip on your floor, but tonight was crazy town. I don't like that."

"It's been handled."

"Like shit, it's been handled. Unless he's dead?" The question was loud and clear.

"I told you I'd take care of it." There's an edge to my voice, and I know he heard it.

"You're waiting for a God-damn fucking confession, aren't you?"

Why? What does he have to tell you that you don't already know? Soft spot or not, I want this taken care of before you leave."

He won't come right out and say it, but we both know what he's telling me he wants done.

"I said it'd be taken care of." This time I don't hide the edge. Instead, I make it very clear how I feel about this conversation.

I slam the phone down with more effort than intended and pick up a bag I'd brought in with me for this shift.

Damn right, I want a confession from him, and I don't care what the Warden has to say about it.

CHAPTER THREE

Once in Clinton's room, I tell the guard he can leave.

He doesn't like it, but I don't give a shit. I don't need him protecting me, not from my patient, who is shackled so tight he can't even move his wrist.

"You fucked up big time, Clint," I tell him. "Why? I told you what was going to happen. You knew I was coming. Why would you risk it all?"

"I saw it."

That's all he says.

I saw it. To anyone else, 'it' could pertain to a lot of things. A ghost. A look on the kid's face. Something Clint imagined.

But to me, I know exactly what he's talking about, and fuck if I don't feel a bit of sympathy for the guy.

"I told you I'd take care of things, asshole. All this," I indicate to his restraints as well as to the sluggishness in his voice, "is all your fault."

"You don't get it," Clint says, his voice slightly slurred. "No one gets it, no one can get it. It was worth it."

I lean back in my chair and stretch a kink out of my neck.

"You saw it for what? A solid five seconds? That was worth it to you?"

He looks away. "You don't get it."

"No, I don't think you do. I told you I'd take care of it. Instead, you got me in deep shit with the Warden. It's a good thing he's not here because if he were, I wouldn't be sitting here with you." I leave the warning in my tone, hoping it gets through whatever sludge of foggiest his meds have him in.

"Fuck the Warden."

Amen, and amen, but I don't say that out loud.

"There have to be consequences, you know that, right, Clint?" Now who's being the asshole. Me. But he's screwed me over once already, and fuck if it's going to happen again.

"You promised."

"You didn't keep your end of the deal, so my promise doesn't matter now." I let out a very long sigh as if I'm bored and don't give

a shit about what he's going through.

He slowly turns his head my way, and I can see the questions flittering through his mind. I wait to see what he'll ask.

"I need..." he pauses, his tongue running over his dry lips.

I do the right thing, and I let him sip on water. With all the meds he's on, it's no doubt his mouth feels like a cotton ball.

"What do you need?" I ask him.

"You know."

I nod. I don't say anything, letting the space between us grow into an uncomfortable silence.

Well, uncomfortable for him.

"I'm sorry," he finally utters.

I sit there and wait. Yeah, I'm being a dick. Sue me.

"There's a body no one knows about. If I tell you where to find her, will you still do it?"

Now this has my attention. I lean forward ever so slightly and stare him directly in the eyes.

"Don't be fucking with me, Clint, you hear me. You tell me the truth, you tell me where to find her body, and I'll help you see red before you die."

"Promise?"

He gives me a little smile when he catches my eye roll. I let him sip more water, and then I show him what I brought.

The smile on his face is brighter than the walls in this room - which isn't hard to imagine, but you get what I mean.

CHAPTER FOUR

CLINTON TO JACK

You brought them. Thank you.

Which is your favorite? Or is it too hard to pick?

How many do you have? This can't be all, right?

My favorite comic is the first comic for Captain America. Yep, I had the first one.

My uncle gave it to me as a gift. He has it now - he has my whole collection and promised to keep it all in the family. I bet I have over a thousand comics. I'd have more if I weren't in here.

Why don't you have all of them bagged?

They should be, you know. Some of them, I'm sure they're worth money. Ahh...I see. These aren't your best ones, are they?

You need to take better care of your comics. Read them, bag them, and be gentle with them. You can't be dog-earing them, Jack. What are you, a barbarian? These things are fragile and rip easily, as you've done to a few of them.

If my uncle saw these, you'd get a proper slap, let me tell you.

Why didn't you bring the good ones in? You know I wouldn't harm them? Hell, I wouldn't even touch them.

Do you remember when you got your first one?

I do.

Uncle Cliff, he's a collector. His father was too. Guess you could say it runs in the family.

He always says, when you've got something of worth, take care of it.

Whenever we'd see him, he'd let me look at his collection. He'd show off his latest editions, put on his gloves, and let me read each page, gently turning them for me. I had to sit on my hands, just so I wouldn't touch them.

My dad, he thought it was a bunch of nonsense, wasting money on something frivolous. Said money had other purposes, that you take care of the need before the want.

It's a good thing my dad died when I was young. He wouldn't have understood my need. He wasn't that type of man.

My uncle, he did. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be dead by now,

that's the God-honest truth.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLINTON

Being born completely color blind is like living in a fog-like state without knowing it.

I didn't know any different.

We didn't realize I was color-blind until I was almost five. Until then, I'd get slaps on the head for not being attentive, my folks just thought I was being lazy, I guess.

It was my uncle who suggested the issue. Guess someone in the family was also color blind, like me, so it was genetic.

I didn't know better.

I learned to differentiate colors others would see, by the shades I saw.

Like - you tell me the apple is red. Fine. Then that shade I see has to be red.

If the tractor was green, then okay, that was another shade I learned to associate as green. Same with the grass, although that was different than the tractor.

I stopped making a fuss about not understanding when Dad would tell me to get the green handle thing or the red cup. He didn't like when something was incomplete or different, and I didn't like getting hit all the time.

Mom, now she was more patient, but she didn't like getting hit either.

I don't remember much about life with Dad, other than he was a rough man who liked things to be a certain way. He was particular, and there was always a sense of stress in the house, especially when he was around.

After he died, well...things sure changed.

We had to move, for one. Mom couldn't keep up with tasks around the farm without him.

We ended up moving to my uncle's farm. He moved out of his house and lived in the trailer that was across the driveway for a bit.

Mom said it was to give us some privacy.

He eventually moved out of that trailer and back into the house.

He was different than my dad. He rarely raised his voice, never raised his hand, and he helped Mom with the chores, which was sure different.

He said the idea of men's work and women's work was a thing of the old days. When you're a bachelor and live on your own, it's all just work. Having Mom around didn't change that.

He said it once in her presence, and I noticed the way she smiled.

She smiled a lot when he was around. I noticed that a lot too.

I had chores that I helped with, and I was old enough to help out in the barn too. I was a regular kid who got into things I shouldn't and had my own scrapes to prove it.

I was probably around nine when I got kicked in the head by a cow.

Yeah, you heard me right. Nine. That did a number on me, in more ways than you can imagine.

One minute I was in the barn, cleaning up the shit, and the next, I was in bed with a massive headache that made everything dizzy for the longest time.

Mom actually thought I was going to go blind. She was afraid that the blurry vision would only get worse.

I should have gone to see the doctor, but those kinds of visits cost money, and extra cash for things like that was something we didn't have.

Uncle Cliff, he told her not to worry much, that the cow just loosened things in my head, and I just needed time to heal. He said it happened to him a few times, too, and there was never any lasting damage.

I don't think she believed him.

I had to stay in that bed until I could see clearly. For the first bit, that bothered me none. Uncle brought up the old television he had in the trailer, and I was able to watch the old Western movies all day long.

Lying in bed, it gets old real quick. It did when I was a kid, and it sure as hell feels the same now. I get antsy, I don't like being in bed for long and being tied now like this is killing me.

I created a list of everything I would do once I was out of bed.

Things like: playing ball, running up and down the driveway, riding my bike down the old tractor trails, and not coming home until the moon was rising.

I couldn't wait for school to start because then, at least, I'd have something to do, but until then, that was probably the worst summer of my childhood.

Well, that's a lie. It was the worst until it became the best. My life changed once my head healed.

The first thing I did when I got out of bed was to head outside. I rode my bike in circles until I got so dizzy, I almost fell straight off the bike. Mom noticed and made me sit in one of the chairs on the porch. She wouldn't let me do anything other than peel vegetables for dinner for the rest of the day.

So there I sat, in a chair, with a bowl on my lap, and I peeled carrots and potatoes.

I nicked my finger with the peeler, and I swear I saw something I'd never seen before, but I stuck my finger in my mouth faster than intended, and by the time I popped it out and looked at the injury, what I saw was gone.

Mom took the peeler and vegetables away from me. Said I needed to be more careful. She gave me a notepad and a pencil and told me to draw her something instead.

I liked to draw, so that wasn't a problem. I still do, in fact. Or...I did, I guess.

So I drew her a picture of the yard, with the barn and the driveway, my bike lying in the dirt, and the trailer across the way.

She put that picture up on the fridge and left it there. Not sure why, but it made me happy that she did.

The next day I rode my bike. I went up and down the long driveway, down our back road, through the tractor trails in the field, and then back to the house for food. The whole time I was fine, I didn't get dizzy, and I wasn't tired, I just got hungry.

It wasn't until I was close to the house that I had a wipeout. My tire caught on a rock, I think, and poof, I went, head over handlebars, and skinned my knees bad.

I cried. I'm not ashamed to admit it. You probably cried, too, when you fell as a kid.

I took one look at my knees, and the tears stopped. Bet you can't guess why.

Oh, you can. Well, fine then.

Sure. For the first time in my life, I saw the color red. The real red, not the shade of grey I associated with red, but a bright, vibrant, pulsing red that light up my world.

I had to be dreaming. I thought for sure I was.

I stared at my knees, both of them bleeding, and that red was there.

I can't even tell you how I felt. I tried to process it, and I couldn't. I still can't put it into words that first time.

It didn't take long for the color to fade, and what had been a vibrant color was back to a dark, nondescript shade I've since grown to hate.

But for a few minutes, that red was glorious.

My mom heard me and came running down to where I sat on the driveway, a dishtowel wrapped in her hands. She helped me to the porch, where I sat, blood dripping down my legs, dishtowel held tight to my knees for added pressure on the wounds.

While she cleaned me up, I sat there, mute, trying to absorb what just happened to me.

I tried to explain it to my mom, but I don't think she believed me. She had that patient look on her face like she was placating me, but I could see in her eyes she didn't really believe that I actually saw a color.

I don't blame her. Until then, I had no idea what it meant to see color. My life is in shades of grey, how could I know what red looks like, right?

CHAPTER SIX

CLINTON TO JACK

Would you have believed me, Jack?

Mom said she did. I even heard her tell Uncle Cliff about it. They both thought I was seeing things, I'm sure. I mean, wouldn't you?

Uncle Cliff tried to talk to me about it later before bed. I almost brushed him off. I wasn't stupid. I wasn't making it up, and I knew when I wasn't being believed.

He told me to tell him if I ever saw the color again, and I told him I would.

I lied.

Of course, I lied.

I cut myself that night, on my arm. I wanted to see the color again, but all I saw was a dark shade, almost black.

I can't tell you my disappointment. I can't explain how I felt at that moment.

I was devastated. Maybe they were right.

But maybe, just maybe, I did it wrong too. I mean, I've been cut before - little nicks here and there. I've bled lots of times, what normal boy doesn't? I'd never seen red before, so maybe it was all in my head.

But between you and me, I wanted to see the color again. I knew deep down it wasn't all in my head, that I didn't imagine it, that it was real.

I wasn't going to let anyone take that away from me.

Do you have a favorite color? Of course, you know mine.

There's something about red...it's invigorating, don't you think?

Red can be used as a sign of aggression, or passion. Pleasure and pain. Red stirs up your blood until you're forced to act. Right?

Well, I acted. A lot. To the point, my mom noticed all the cuts on my arms and legs.

Uncle Cliff, he got worried and sat me down one day to talk.

I tried explaining to him about the color. I think he finally started to believe me.

You have any idea what it's like to finally be believed?

A person's whole life can change, that's what.

I know mine did.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLINTON

Everyone has addictions, and seeing red became mine.

My addiction wasn't all that bad while I was growing up. Sure, I paid attention when people got hurt at school, I always seemed to be hanging out around the nurses' office to see if anyone was bleeding, and maybe I got into fights on purpose because nose bleeds turned out to be amazing color displays for me - whether it was my own nose or someone else's.

I stressed Mom out a lot with these fights.

Uncle Cliff tried to get me to stop. He knew what was happening, knew why it was happening, and kept trying to find ways to get it to stop.

He'd bribe me with new comics.

If I could go a week without getting into a fight, he'd take me to the comic bookstore.

If I could go for two weeks, he'd buy me one.

If I went three weeks without getting into a fight, we'd get a comic and stop at the diner for a cheeseburger and milkshake.

I never could go a month, though. I tried. God knows I tried, but that need to see red, it was overpowering.

My high school had a boxing team, and my uncle encouraged me to join.

I really didn't need the encouragement. Teenage boys learning how to fight properly, there was a lot of blood involved, and it was awesome.

Let's face it - boxing and blood go hand in hand.

I became known as a bleeder, but it was on purpose. Not only did I bleed a lot, but I also made sure my opponents bled just as much. It's not like it's hard, you know.

You ever box? I miss it. Miss the energy, the excitement, the drive to win.

That fed my addiction for a while. But, it got cold, you know? Cold and old, almost like it wasn't enough, and something inside me needed to find more ways to see red - ways that wouldn't get me

caught.

Not the easiest thing.

I was at the point where I needed to think long-term about my life.

Did I want to be a farmer like my uncle, help him and take over the business one day, or did I want to do something else, be someone else?

I could have been a doctor. I'd see all the red I needed then, but the color-blind issue got in the way.

It's not hard to live in a color-blind world, you know, you just need to learn how to adjust to what other people expect, that's all.

I did what was expected. I trained as a mechanic and helped out around the farm. I had a thing with engines, so if I had to be stuck in a job all my life, why not do something I was good at doing?

Right? You should know.

It wasn't exciting being a grease monkey, but it brought in money and kept me busy.

Busy is what my uncle wanted too - I think deep down he knew with too much time on my hands, I could get into a lot of trouble.

He was right.

Anytime I was out drinking, I'd get in a fight.

Spent way too many nights in the local jail, that's for sure.

Guess I was stressing my mom out too much.

Uncle Cliff pulled me aside one night, needing to chat.

Now, a chat like that could have gone in a lot of different directions, let me tell you. I was a hot head, and he knew it, and if he'd approached me any other way, I would have punched him and left.

He said Mom was worried about me, that she was asking questions, lots of questions, specifically about the blood on my clothes.

He asked if the drive to see red was still as strong as before. I laughed.

He said he understood what addictions were like, and he wanted to help me keep it under control.

First thing first, no more bloody clothes in my laundry basket. I had to wash them in the barn.

Next thing was to stop with all the attention-seeking, especially with the cops. He said he couldn't have them coming around, and eventually, I was going to go too far one day, and he couldn't have

that.

Now, what the fuck do you think he meant by that?
Cause, at the time, I had no sweet clue.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLINTON TO JACK

Living on a farm is dirty work.

Oh, I see the way your nose turns up. I hear you don't like farmers, is that right?

Well, let me tell you something.

I ain't no farmer. I'm a mechanic, through and through. Sure, I'd help out on the farm, I'd tune up the tractors and equipment, not just for our farm, but the others around us.

I was a mechanic, Jack. Let's keep that plain between us.

My uncle, he was the farmer and for shit, they are dirty and do things you can't even imagine.

For instance...no idea how things are done now, but back then, we did our own composting on the farm.

Ever think about what happens to all the dead animals? They sure as hell don't get funerals and it can get expensive to pay someone to come collect them.

Compost, Jack. Fucking compost.

Now, if it were small animals, not a problem. But we had cattle on our farm too. Just like other farms around us.

They all got together and sectioned off a piece of land between them to use to compost their cattle.

Waiting for that carcass to compost takes a lot of time.

Time, manure, and material like sawdust, old hay, and shit. For a large size cow, it could take four months or more and you got to keep an eye on it, turning it, watering it, and then you can grind up the bones if needed to be used for around the farm.

Everything has a cycle. Everything has a purpose.

Don't you dare hum that fucking song.

Now that I've explained what happens to farm animals, any thoughts on why my uncle didn't want the police coming around?

Think about it, Jack. Just think about it.

CHAPTER NINE

CLINTON

One weekend a month, ever since we moved in with him, my uncle would go away.

He'd leave on a Friday afternoon and come home late Sunday night.

Never said where he went, what he did, who he met...nothing.

Mom never pried. She said that it only made sense for a man who lived his life alone, to need some time away from the craziness we've added to his life.

Guess that made sense, I mean, at the time to me as a kid, it didn't. But now, hell yeah, I get it.

He became an instant husband and father, whether he realized it or not.

I asked him once where he went and what he did.

I don't remember exactly what he said, but it had something to do with men needing to have their own private time. I didn't get it, but he promised to explain it better when I got older.

I don't think Mom ever knew what he did on those weekends. If she did...well, I don't think it would have mattered, to be honest. She would have turned a blind eye, understanding that life with him and whatever he did was better than being on our own. With him, we had a roof over our heads, food to eat, and Mom didn't need to work outside of the house.

She appreciated the security he gave us, so why rock the boat, right?

It wasn't until I was maybe fifteen or sixteen that I started to be more interested in those weekends.

I remember one time, no clue when or how old I was, but he still wasn't home by the time I went to bed. I remember seeing his truck lights come down the driveway and listened for him to come into the house. He didn't, not for the longest time.

Mom waited for him. She sat in the front room and was knitting something. I heard mumblings and then the squeak of the stairs as she went to her room.

Him, he went back outside.

I know, because I sat at my window and watched.

I watched him head back to the barn. He stayed out there a good long while. Long enough that I got tired of watching and headed to bed.

I didn't think much of it the next morning. I went out to the barn, did my chores, and was about to head back to the house when something caught my attention.

At the back of the barn, there was a stall with a big metal stock tank.

Now, that tank was used for a lot of things, as you can imagine on a farm.

Sometimes held feed. Sometimes hay. Sometimes water. Sometimes cleaning solution. Sometimes dead carcasses.

I always knew something dead was in there because Uncle Cliff covered that tank and locked it tight.

The day before, that tank had been open. I know because I was surprised at how clean it looked.

Now, it was locked. Why? What did Uncle put in there last night?

I never did find out, but let me tell you, I started to watch him more and more.

I noticed a pattern, too.

Every time he'd go to leave, he'd clean that tank up real good.

Every time he returned, that tank would be locked up tight. But only for a day or two.

Usually, by the time I got home from school, that tank would be open again, with Uncle nowhere in sight. He'd be out in the fields working.

I never asked him about it. I knew not to.

Figured, eventually, he'd tell me.

And he did. Eventually.

Took a while. Actually, it took me snooping around for him to be honest with me.

Uncle had a secret. A deep, dark, ugly secret that he lived with his whole life.

See...uncle had an addiction, just like me.

And just like me, he couldn't stop until that monster was fed.

Our coming to live with him changed things up for him, put a damper on his activities, and he had to be smart about how he did

things.

Things he didn't want anyone knowing about. Like...the cops.

Turns out, my addiction, my drive, and my need for red was a family trait.

No, he wasn't color-blind like me. He just had desires that blinded him to everything else, and he had to learn to control them.

Once a man can learn to control his cravings, he becomes powerful.

Powerful enough to do anything.

Powerful enough to do everything.

Power and control go hand in hand. Just look at the most powerful men in our country - consider the control they have, not only over themselves but over the people beneath them. They can and will do whatever the fuck they want and get away with it.

The most powerful men have secrets we can only dream about. Secrets that could destroy them if they lost control. I bet you they've buried more bodies than anyone in this building and you know I'm right.

With that power, you can pay for silence, for blind eyes, for covert interactions.

Uncle Cliff, he had that kind of power.

Sure, he was a dirty farmer who smelled like shit, who wore overalls and coveralls instead of suits, and who'd rather get his feet dirty than watch someone else do the work, but that power was there. It was a part of him, a part of his genetic makeup, or so he always told me.

It was part of mine, too, and once he recognized that, that's when he started teaching me how to be more careful.

The best teacher is the one who has done the work themselves first, don't you think?

CHAPTER TEN

CLINTON TO JACK

You know where I'm going with this, right?

You have to. You've seen too much, heard too much, and know too much not to know where I'm going with this.

What specifically is it about farmers you don't like?

It's not the way they smell, because you're surrounded by that odor every day in here.

Is it because they can get away with things you only dream about?

Farmers aren't stupid. They know things. They understand things.

Sure, they can do things, too, that regular people would never think about doing.

But the fact my uncle was a farmer had nothing to do with what he did...it just made things easier for him, that was all.

Think about that.

Jack, I'm kind of cold. Feel my fingers...they're frozen popsicles. This fucking room is so cold - do you freeze your patients to death or what? For fucks sake, where the hell is that draft coming from?

Seriously, your bedside manner sucks ass, man.

At least fix that draft. Close a goddamn window or something.

For the last minutes of my life, don't you think I deserve to be warm? My body will freeze in the ground soon enough.

Oh, it'll burn first? Guess I'll be nice and toasty before that happens then, huh?

You bastard. Everything they said about you downstairs is true. You're one sadistic asshole, aren't you?

[Jack here: I grabbed Clint a fresh warm blanket and then told him to stop stalling. This is too much about his uncle and not enough about him, as far as I'm concerned.]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLINTON

It's because of my uncle that I'm in here. Surely you've figured that out by now?

Is someone born evil, or do they learn it?

I'm not an evil guy. I wasn't raised to be evil. I was taught how to curb my cravings, to satisfy my urges, and to retain control over my addiction.

That doesn't make me evil.

It makes me smart.

Or stupid, depending on how you look at it. Stupid enough to get caught, I guess.

Uncle Cliff never did.

I learned from the best, but I wanted to make my own path, you know? Do it my way, instead of always his.

Fuck, he was an asshole when it came to his rules.

I was in my early twenties, still living at home, but I had a good ride, so why would I move out? It was the night of my birthday, and rather than go out with my friends to the bar like I often did, Uncle Cliff took me on one of his monthly weekend trips.

Both Mom and I were a little shocked when he mentioned it.

According to him, I was a man now, not a child, and I deserved time away.

He called it a bonding experience. He wasn't kidding.

All the years of living there, all the years of watching him come home and park in the barn. All the years of wondering what was in that tank. And he finally takes me with him so that I can stop the wondering and the sneaking around.

It was the best weekend of my life up to that point.

We drove about five hours that night, landed in a city I'd never been to, and pulled up to a motel that wasn't in the best area of town.

Uncle crashed on the bed as soon as we got in.

Me, I was too wound up. Sure, I was tired, but I had so many questions that I knew not to ask.

The next day, we went to a diner for breakfast.

Uncle was chatty with the waitress and even made her blush a few times. The diner wasn't too busy, so she gave us a lot of attention.

Uncle asked me what I thought of her. He told me to look her over real good, to make sure I have the right impression.

I asked what that meant.

Did she wear a wedding ring? Did she have a tan mark on her finger where a ring could or should be? While she was working, did she focus on any other person in the diner too much? Like maybe a kid who sat in a forgotten booth with crayons or was there a man behind the counter who she seemed afraid of.

I wasn't sure why all these things mattered, but he said to trust him.

So I looked her over.

She was youngish - older than me but younger than Uncle.

No ring. No tan line. No kid in a booth with crayons.

The cook in the back always smiled at her, and I noticed he'd watch her when she wasn't looking.

Uncle sighed when I said that.

He told me to finish up so we could go. That was it. No explanation of why that cook in the back mattered or not.

We ran some errands - to a hardware store, grocery store for snacks, and clothing store to get Mom some items she asked for and then hit another diner on the other side of town just before the dinner rush.

I remember asking him if that's all he did on the weekends he went away. Ran errands. Got things for Mom. Spent time alone.

He had this glint in his eye as he leaned back in his seat and folded his arms.

He asked me what I noticed about our waitress this time.

She was pretty with her hair in a braid, no ring, polite and friendly but always glanced over her shoulder toward the others working in the back kitchen.

He nodded.

He asked if I knew what the difference was between this server and the one from breakfast.

He said - the morning waitress would be missed if anything happened to her. The one we have now, no one from work would be missing her. He then went on to say, she either lives alone, with

friends, or with someone who doesn't treat her right.

He said he could tell all this just by her interactions with others.

Let's be honest here - I had no sweet clue where he was going with all this. Who the fuck cared if someone was going to be missed or not.

Uncle chatted her up nice. He found out when she was done her shift and asked if he could come by to see her.

She hummed and hawed but finally gave him a smile and a time when she was done. She asked if I'd be joining, and he laughed, saying tonight was for grown-ups.

Guess she took that as a no.

We didn't linger too long after that. Said he didn't want to freak her out or appear too sketchy to anyone.

He said it was always best to remain invisible and unmemorable.

He said a lot of things during that trip. Some I remember. Others I've forgotten. Some made sense. Others felt like they were straight out of left field.

It wasn't until after it was all said and done that I understood.

We went back to our motel, and Uncle Cliff said it was time to get stuff ready.

Said waiting till the last minute always left room for mistakes to happen, and mistakes lead to the police sniffing around, and we all know how he felt about that.

He never came right out and said what it was we were preparing for, but he didn't need to either.

Deep down, I knew.

I knew, and it excited me.

I asked him one question as we prepared the room: would I see red?

He laughed. Not a '*are you crazy*' kind of laugh either, not one that made me feel stupid for simply asking the question.

He promised I'd see red. More than enough to whet my appetite. Enough to give me room to dream.

Fuck, that was all I needed to hear.

He gave me an ultimatum, though. He said in order for this to work, I had to stop with all the fighting, with all the stupid shit I tended to pull at the bars. It was time to grow up and learn restraint. The best things in life come when you put in the time and make them count, is what he said.

So...if I wanted to see red tonight and be taught a way to see red

without consequences, I had to set it in my mind that it was a once-a-month deal.

I'll be honest - I didn't know if I could make that promise. Sometimes the need just hits like a sack full of balls in the gut, and I can't do anything but go pick a fight so I can satisfy the need.

Promising to wait a whole month? That didn't seem worth it.

I asked if I could wait till after we did whatever we did, so I could see if it would be worth it.

He hummed and hawed on that one for quite a while.

Eventually, he said since I thought about it and asked like the man he wanted me to be, then yes. But if I didn't accept his terms, there would be consequences.

It was the way he said it, the quick change in his temperament, the flash of anger in his face, the coldness I felt from him for the first time in my life...I knew what that consequence would be.

There was no way in hell I'd be returning home alive and able to squeal on him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLINTON TO JACK

That was the first time I remember being scared of him.

It wasn't a fun feeling, that's for sure. If I'd been younger, I would have probably pissed myself at the threat.

Ever meet someone that turned out to be someone completely different than what you had in your head?

I'm sure you get that all the time in here.

All my life, Uncle Cliff was this one person: my favorite uncle who gave me comic books. My pseudo-father figure. The guy who took care of us, provided for us. The only man in my life that mattered.

But the way he looked at me, all I saw was a killer.

Someone to fear, and...fuck, I didn't know what to do with that.

I knew things were about to change, and I was truly entering the stage of being a real man.

I would have to stop living in the shadows, feeling secure in not knowing the truth.

When I asked him why he did this, he said it was to protect me and Mom.

He said that on a go-forward basis, I'd always have to keep Mom's protection at the forefront of my actions.

He said, having a family made things harder, that having to put your basic needs to the back in order to protect the ones you loved, well...it was worth it, but man, was it hard.

I asked if he regretted taking us in, and he put his hand on my shoulder and said never. Having us in his life was the best thing about being alive, we made him to be a better version of the man he never thought he could be.

I knew he loved us. I knew he loved Mom.

I also knew he loved what he was about to do. I could see it in the way he couldn't sit still, how his leg bounced, his fingers tapped against his thigh. He was excited, the anticipation of what was to come a drug to his system.

I'd never seen Uncle Cliff like that.

But I liked it.

It was contagious, and I realized that if that's what it would be like, then I wanted in.

Right now, the need to see red was overwhelming. The need hit, and I reacted.

But if I followed Uncle Clint's advice, the anticipation of seeing red, the preparation and the act, would be even more intoxicating, and man, let me tell you...I wanted that high.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CLINTON

I kept quiet as we prepped the room.

He removed the lightbulbs from all the lamps so that only the bathroom one would turn on.

I didn't bother asking why, it seemed obvious.

While most of the stuff that Uncle Cliff brought into the room was hidden, you could still see things - like the bindings on the bed, his toolbox, and shit.

The other stuff was hidden. Like the garbage bags, the plastic wrapped around the mattress, beneath the bed sheet, not to mention the sheet of plastic rolled up under the bed, the change of clothes, and the extra towels he'd bought from the store.

I mentioned the man had a thing for rules, right? That night, he gave me a list I was to follow:

Number one: don't question anything.

Number two: don't disagree with anything.

Number three: listen to everything he said.

Number four: do things the way he said.

Number five: keep my mouth shut at all times.

Number six: stay away from the room until the outside lights are turned on.

He said that this was still his time and he needed to satisfy his own urges until I joined in, so I needed to give him the space to do so.

I don't know about you, but my mind went to a lot of places, and all of them entailed him having sex with her. Was I jealous? Fuck yeah. I'd lost my virginity a long time ago, and if he was having these sex weekends once a month, keeping me on the side wasn't fair.

Not that I complained. You know I didn't. I did as I was told and walked across the street to a coffee shop with some bills in my pocket and picked a table close to the window.

I figured I had a lot of time on my hands, so I ordered a burger and fries, made sure I was friendly enough with the old hag, so she

wouldn't remember me too much, and then I waited.

It felt like forever for Uncle Cliff to return back to the motel after picking the girl up.

I watched as they walked into the room together, his hand on her back.

I didn't see her face, but I imagined the smile on her face as she looked up at him after he opened the door.

Learning to be patient is fucking hard, and sitting there while I knew he was having sex with her, was fucking torture.

If you frown at me one more fucking time for saying fuck, then you can go fuck yourself.

[Jack here: You know by now I don't care about the language. I'm frowning because I'm starting to get bored. A fuck weekend? This is not what I thought I'd be hearing. Now, the extra stuff in the room has me intrigued, but let's get on with it already.]

By the time the light came on outside our room, I'd finished dinner, eaten my pie, and was tired of stalling for time. I plopped money down on the table and left.

I didn't head right across the street. I didn't know if anyone was watching, and I thought it might be best to get lost in the crowd, you know?

So I walked down the street, until I was out of sight of the diner, crossed the road, and backtracked it to the motel. I went in through the back, walked my way around to the room, and stood there like a fool.

My hands were sweating by that point. Did I knock or just walk in? Was the door locked or open? He never told me what to do once I got to the door.

My hand landed on the doorknob, and I turned it. The door was open.

I will never forget the sight of that room.

Never forget the smell of sweat and fear. The image of my uncle sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing only his jeans, his hand wrapped around the woman's calf as she lay there, naked and spread-eagled, her mouth gagged, and a blindfold covering her eyes.

The smile on Uncle's face...it haunts my nightmares still. I didn't recognize him - which I know sounds weird, but it's true.

It's happened to you before, right? When someone you've known for a long time becomes unrecognizable? There was a width and depth to his eyes that were haunting, and the smile on his face was...terrifying. The way he held himself, even sitting there, it was like he was a different creature.

The woman, she was silent, but it was hard for her. I think he threatened her, he had to have. With him touching her body, it was like a tether. The moment he lifted his hand, she started crying and screaming, her head moving side to side while her upper body lifted up off the bed, as if trying to get away. The second his hand landed back on her leg, she went silent.

When he spoke, his voice was low, but there was an edge to it that I even caught.

He told me she was delicious, that if I wanted to have some fun with her before we began, to go for it.

He remained where he was, his hand on her leg, while I focused on what he said.

I could have sex with her. After he had sex with her.

He laughed, almost as if he could read my mind.

He wasn't leaving the room, so if I had stage fright, not to worry about it. Maybe next time.

I swallowed hard but nodded. I wasn't sure if I could have sex with her with him there, I mean...who could, right?

The times I had sex, my partner was always willing. Doing it then, it would be different. That girl, she wasn't willing with me. Maybe she had been for him, but not anymore.

He stood up and when she started screaming through the gag, he backhanded her so hard she passed out.

The deafening silence was bliss.

With her out, Uncle explained what was going to happen.

He didn't want to kill her right away. First, I needed to play with her a little bit, and how I played was up to me. He had all the tools needed for me to see red, I just had to decide how I wanted to start.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLINTON TO JACK

I'll be honest, Jack. I really didn't hear him, I was too focused on the girl and taking in her naked body.

He didn't want to kill her - right away. Eventually, yes, we were going to.

I refused to let my mind settle on that sentence for any length of time.

I mean...I knew that was the end goal, of course, I knew that, but until that moment, it was just an idea, an idea that could be wrong, you know?

You never forget your first. Everyone says that. We all talk about our firsts - in the middle of the night when we can't sleep, guys downstairs will take turns telling the story, sharing in the feels and what happened.

You'd be surprised how similar some of the stories are.

Everyone is always scared at first. There's a fake bravery that eventually ends up being real, but it can take time to make the jump.

If I thought about the fact we were going to kill her, then fuck yeah, I would have shit my pants and been unable to do anything.

But I wasn't going to kill her. I was only going to play with her. I didn't need to kill her to see red, and the whole killing thing - that was for Uncle Cliff and his addiction, not mine.

Mine was to see red.

I knew what I was doing - how could I not? I'd been practicing for years, cutting myself, getting into fights. I knew how to make the blood appear.

This time was different, though. There was no fighting involved. No self-harming.

This time, I was going to inflict pain on someone else, someone who would not be fighting back.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if I could do it.

Here's the thing about addictions... they grow and evolve until they become all-consuming.

Uncle Cliff promised that taking this next step would be enough, that I wouldn't need to get into the fights because what happened in that

room would feed my addiction for a long time.

I had to believe him.

He'd never lied to me before.

I remember standing there, a knife in my hand, staring at the girl's body.

I knew the moment I started cutting her skin, she'd wake up.

Would that only enhance the experience or dampen it?

I think we both know the answer to that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLINTON

The toolbox was set up on the nightstand, and inside were a whole assortment of tools for me to use.

Knives. Hammers. Nails. Hand saw.

I took one of the knives and slowly drew it along her thigh.

God, see the goosebumps on my arms right now? I still remember that feeling.

I played with her, and oh, it was so good.

I saw red. On her legs. On her arms. On her chest and neck and face and on her stomach. Everywhere my knife touched her fragile body, red pooled up and trickled, and I was mesmerized.

It's a rush, a rush that fills me up in such a way I finally feel complete.

Even now. You know, when they take my blood, insert these shit things into my skin, I still see that small drop of red appear.

I'm at the stage of my life where I'll take what I can get, but back then, oh fuck, it was like being on a high you never want to fall from.

That whole night was amazing.

Sure, the woman woke up and screamed through her gag.

Yeah, it bothered me. At first. I mean...she was obviously terrified, and who wouldn't be? You're tied up to a bed, gagged, and two men are standing above you with knives in their hands.

It was fucking awesome.

I only hesitated for a brief moment - and sure, at that moment, there were clashes going on in my brain about what I was doing and what was going to happen, but I quickly squashed all that.

I wasn't killing the girl. I was only using her as a conduit for my addiction.

Whatever Uncle Cliff did with her - that was on him and him alone.

So I fucking bled her. I sunk my knife into her over and over. I stabbed. I slashed. I cut.

I even fucking chopped off toes and fingers because, holy fuck,

you know how much losing those appendages makes you bleed?

I saw fucking red, and it was fucking awesome.

Uncle Cliff had to stop me, which was fine. By the time I was done, I needed a break.

I was going to leave the room, but I was stopped.

No leaving - apparently, that was a rule I hadn't heard. Made sense, I was covered in blood, and it would get noticed.

By that point, the plastic sheet was on the floor, visible.

I went to sit on the other bed. I could have gone in the bathroom, I guess if I didn't want to see the rest, but I was too hyped up, too sensitized to what was going on to want to leave.

Fuck that shit. In for a penny and all that crap, right?

Uncle Cliff, man, he was an artist.

He asked me if I wanted to take the final blow, but I wasn't there to kill anyone, so I let him slice her throat.

It was fucking perfect. I sat on the edge of the bed, but the moment that blade cut into her skin, I was on my feet, bending over and watching the red flow out of her body.

Here's what I learned that night.

I only see red when the blood is fresh.

At some point, the color bleed stops, and the blood turns black in shade.

Fresh is best, as they say. Especially when it comes to blood.

The rest of the night blends together. Uncle cut her as best he could, taking parts of her legs, arms, and wrapping them up in plastic.

Remember when I said we'd wrapped the bed in plastic?

Well, after having his fun with her, he took the bedding and plastic, wrapped the girl up in it nice and tight, then dropped her on the floor, onto the extra plastic sheet we'd laid there. He then tied that up with rope, and together we worked at cleaning the room as best we could.

Uncle had me wipe every surface down with bleach. I even added bleach to a few blood drops on the carpet - not that it mattered much. Those rooms weren't the cleanest, to begin with.

By the time we were ready to go, the room looked like it was ready to be made up for the next guest - just minus bed sheets.

The truck had been backed up to the door, so after making sure no one was around, we put the plastic-wrapped body in the bed of the truck, added garbage bags full of towels, blood-stained clothing,

and other shit, and then hid everything under a tarp.

By the time we were headed down the road, the sun was starting to rise, and Uncle Cliff was whistling like he hadn't a care in the world.

We didn't head straight home.

Crazy, right? With a dead body in the back of our truck, you'd think getting rid of the evidence would be a top priority.

Not for my uncle. We drove a few hours, away from anywhere close to the direction of home, and stopped for breakfast and even fueled up with gas.

We then made a few other stops for groceries Mom had asked us to grab.

During these stops, I offered to sit in the pickup and wait, but Uncle told me to knock it off. Our pickup looked like any other farmers' pickup, and smelled just as bad, too, so why would anyone want to look in the back of our truck?

Me? I was a bundle of nerves.

Him? He acted like it was a regular errand day away from the farm.

I remember recognizing the fact if I was going to continue with those weekends away, I needed to calm down and learn from him.

It really didn't take long.

On the way home, he asked me if I understood now, and I told him I did.

I understood that one weekend away would feed the beast inside me.

We made two more stops that day.

We pulled up to a tattoo shop in a town close to home. He told me he'd only be a few minutes, to wait in the truck and keep an eye on things.

He was probably fifteen minutes, in and out.

Uncle Cliff had this tattoo on his bicep. Three triangles with notches all over two of them. The third one was plain. Until that day. When he came back in the truck, there was a small line on one side.

Of course, I asked him about it. When I was a kid, I asked him once about the tattoos he had on his arms. He always told me about them - except that one. That one was a mystery to me.

Until now.

He almost wasn't going to tell me, I could tell by the way he

hesitated. Then he said the tattoos represent the life we live and what we leave behind. The marks on each side of the triangle reminded him of the lives he'd touched.

I asked if one of those lines are for me and Mom. I knew they weren't, but I wanted to make sure. The snarl he gave me, the hiss as he said 'of course not', told me all I needed to know.

Those marks, or notches, were his way of keeping score of the women he'd killed. The new one was for the woman in the bed of the truck.

We made one more stop at a post office. He said he had something he needed to mail, and again, I was to wait.

Don't ask me what he mailed because I had no idea. He didn't walk in there with an envelope or parcel, so your guess is as good as mine.

The memories of what happened, were enough to satisfy that hunger. I could wait. I could learn. I would make the act count.

Like I said, I learned from the best.

By the time we made it home, the sun had set, the porch lights were on, and Mom was there, welcoming us home as we pulled up the driveway.

We stopped the truck at the house, unloaded everything for Mom, and then while I helped her put things away, Uncle Cliff drove to the barn and did whatever it was he did.

Mom mentioned I seemed happy that night while we sat at the dinner table, and I guess I was.

I remained happy for a few weeks. I stayed out of trouble like I promised, stopped going to the bar as much, and when I did, I walked away from more fights than I ever had in my life.

Mom asked what had changed in me. Did I meet someone?

She'd made countless comments about me being old enough to be on my own, didn't I want a family, and that she was ready for some grand babies, but I knew that life wasn't for me.

Uncle Cliff might like having that burden of responsibility on his shoulders, but not me.

I remembered what he'd said to me - in fact, I never forgot it.

It was hard enough taking care of Mom and making sure she never suffered from my blood addiction. I didn't need to bring another woman into my life, another person to take care of.

Uncle Cliff said he appreciated having me around. I was living out in his trailer, so it was like I had my own place anyway. Those

years were the best of my life. I didn't know what I had until it was gone.

That's like most things in life, though, isn't it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CLINTON TO JACK

[Jack here: Clinton is looking down at his own muscle-depleted arm. He tells me to pull up the sleeve of his shirt and look for the triangles. It's not hard to find them...while most of his skin is covered, there's a space that's been set apart, a space that holds these triangles.]

I told Uncle Cliff I wanted a tattoo like his, a way to honor the memory of the women who help me see red. He told me to find a different design, that this wasn't one just anyone could get. Some shit about it being exclusive to some group and crap.

Whatever, I didn't listen to him, obviously.

I went to that same shop we stopped in, but the guy refused to ink me. Told me I had no idea what I was getting into and that Uncle would kill me and him if I ever got it without permission.

Like, what the fuck, man.

So fine. I found a different place and got them to just add lines next to each other, until they eventually formed their own triangle. Once Uncle Cliff was gone, I had someone add in the triangles, one at a time. I always meant to add a new one. He only had three, and they were full. I was going to have more.

That weekend though, it's one I have never forgotten about.

All the weekends that followed were as good, sometimes better, but that weekend...that first time...it was one I will never and have never forgotten.

Do you blame me?

I went on more trips with him. In the three years we went away together, I think I might have missed maybe a handful of months.

I followed his rules for the longest time until I was ready to venture out on my own.

Things remained the same when we were away on our trips. I sliced and slashed, he made the final cut. I never killed anyone - that was always on him.

Don't argue particulars with me. I didn't bleed them enough to drain them dry, and they wouldn't have died from my wounds.

Fine - if left unattended, sure, they might have. But I wasn't the one who killed them.

[Jack here: I was feeling a little feisty and argued with Clint about the semantics. I mean - look where he is...he's here for a reason, right? And yes, I realize I was arguing with a 'crazy' man.]

I didn't always stick to his shadow. I was a grown man and ready to prove it.

You know, they attributed a lot of kills to me - more than I deserved. All those bodies they found on the backfield - they weren't all from my hand.

For the most part, they were Uncle's. He'd been killing for a long time. The few bodies in there that were from my hand...they were nothing in the grand scheme of things.

Besides, they never found my burial site. They just found his and assumed it was mine because I'd been caught red-handed.

I have a few things I regret in life, and the look on Mom's face when I was arrested is the one I regret the most. I'd let her down.

It wasn't that she was disgusted with me - and she had every right to be, but that wasn't it. Secretly, I think she always knew what was happening, for both Uncle and myself. The look on her face though, it was disappointment.

Probably that I got caught. Not for what I'd done. Because me getting caught meant she was on her own with no one to take care of things for her.

After Uncle Cliff died, we hired people to take care of things, but I was still around, still helping at nights and such. With me gone...she had to sell the farm. She kept the trailer and the little parcel of land it was on, but that wasn't fair to Mom.

Yep. I regret that. I didn't take care of her like I should have. Uncle wouldn't have been happy with me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CLINTON

Uncle Cliff was happy with letting his playmates rest in the back fields, mixed in with the livestock.

Me, not so much.

The main reason was because I didn't want to explain to him why I was out in the back field when I didn't need to be. He'd know for sure I was doing things on my own, and I didn't know how he'd feel about that.

So I found another location.

The thing about living in the middle of nowhere, around small farm towns, is that our county had a shred garbage dump, literally in the middle of nowhere.

They didn't monitor the place. There were no security guards or anything. They locked the gate at night and left.

But there was more than one entrance into the dump.

Down a forgotten back road that was almost overgrown with weeds was a broken gate.

When I started taking things into my own hands, I'd take that road, and I found the perfect spot to dump my girls.

Going on those weekend trips with Uncle was fine, but he was wrong in the idea that it would satisfy my cravings.

It only enhanced them. Make them more pronounced and more present.

It's all I thought about, day and night. I'd be at work, and I'd daydream about seeing red. I'd be in the barn at night and get so itchy with the need to get out and see red again.

He had no idea how intense the craving for me was. He might be fine with doing whatever he did with those girls just once a month, but not me.

I never had sex with them, Jack. It was never about the sex for me.

But I would kill them. That last stroke along the throat, all that blood that welled up and poured out, dripping down their skin, pooling on the floor...that was the icing on the cake.

I had a rhythm, a routine. Start with small nicks and progress to deeper cuts. Their cries and screams played a melody in my head as I worked, it was beautiful.

The women were never from town, I knew better than to play in my own sandbox, and I never rented a hotel room like Uncle Cliff.

Why bother when I wasn't going to have sex with them?

My truck was good enough. I'd pick the girls up, suggest we go someplace for some fun, and then along the way, I'd knock them out with a bash to the head, then tie them up and carry them to the back of the pickup.

The back of my truck held dead animals, live animals, manure, hay, and tools...a little more blood wasn't going to hurt it, and yes, I made sure to hose it down afterward. We had a hose connected to a water tank at the side of the barn that I'd use.

No one ever questioned it, which worked fine for me.

Doing this was so much better than getting into fights.

[Jack here: there's a long pause. I think Clint is lost in memories, the smile on his face has that faraway slant to it. I ask him who he's remembering, but he doesn't answer. Not for a bit.]

They were all just girls, you know? No one really special, at least, not to me.

Except for one.

She's the reason I got caught, too.

I knew better. I knew not to play in my sandbox, I said that before, right? Uncle drilled that into me when he was alive...the closer to home you play, the more chances you have at getting caught. Getting caught meant all of this would end, and I couldn't let that happen.

Until I forgot all about the rules.

It was my own fault. I knew better. Knew I never wanted to get involved with anyone, and yet, the moment I saw her, I was lost.

I couldn't help it.

I wonder if she knew the moment she smiled at me, she was a dead woman walking?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CLINTON TO JACK

The heart makes men do stupid things. I knew that, and yet, when it came down to it, I ignored all the warnings.

Hell, even Mom warned me to be careful. Can you believe that?

I mean, here was her chance to have those grandbabies she'd once said she wanted, and yet, she told me to be careful, that Rosemary was too good for me, that there were too many people who would get hurt if anything happened.

I told you Mom knew, didn't I? She never came right out and ever said anything, but she always knew. Guess that whole crap about mother's intuition is right.

I should have listened to her. My life was good. I saw red whenever the desire hit, I was careful, I was getting away with things, and life was just...good.

Is it human nature to mess with things when they're good or just something stupid that I did?

I mean, even when we're happy, we're never truly happy, right?

Come on, you must do it too? Everyone downstairs knows what I'm talking about.

We can't leave well enough alone. We can't be happy with happy, there's some stupid drive inside of us to mess things up.

We like to fuck with life, don't we?

Is that why we're here, do you think? Because we're broken? Damaged? I know the docs just love us, love messing with our brains, trying to figure out all the fucked up in here.

Rosemary...she was the apple, or the snake, and I was the boy who wanted to please her.

Shut up, the analogy does so work.

She smiled at me, and my whole life changed. I wanted her in my life, I wanted my world to spin around hers. I wanted her more than I wanted to see red, if you can believe that.

I swear - if things had turned out different, she could have been my saving grace.

Fuck, I just had to fuck with things, didn't I?

That's another regret. I fucking knew better, too.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CLINTON

I first saw Rosemary on the side of the road.

She was wearing a soft pink dress and was bent down looking at a flat tire.

Of course, I pulled over. Anyone else would have.

I recognized her right away, how could I not?

We'd gone to school together. She was always a quiet thing, offering smiles, head stuck in a book during lunch, polite and friendly, but hands off.

I admired her from afar but I was never really interested. I was more focused on boxing and wrestling and seeing all the red I could back then. Girls weren't on my radar.

Didn't mean I didn't see her, though.

As I fixed her tire, we made some small talk. She remembered me, knew my mom, said she was sorry to hear about Uncle Cliff, and then mentioned to me that she had a box of his orders still sitting at her bookstore if I ever wanted to come in and get them.

Orders? Bookstore? I had no idea what she was talking about.

Seems Uncle Cliff had a standing subscription that had never got cancelled. They were sent to her bookstore, and for the past year or so, they'd kept them to the side. They did call Mom, but she never told me about them, nor did she ever stop in to get them.

That was weird, but when it came to my uncle and his passing, Mom took it pretty hard and didn't like to talk about him much.

I never poked, just let her be, figured she'd talk when she was ready, you know?

When Rosemary started up her car, there was a cluck-cluck-cluck sound. I knew right away the issue - and told her to follow me back to the shop so I could take a look at her oil.

One thing led to another, and she invited me to her place for dinner as a thank you for rescuing her.

Like I was going to say no.

I put on my best shirt, cleanest jeans and even picked up some flowers for her. My hands were all sweaty, and I swear I couldn't

string two sentences together at first, but she was lovely, patient, and the moment she showed me all the comics that came to her store for Uncle Cliff, my nervousness disappeared.

Turned out she liked comics too and confessed she'd read every single one of them.

Now, how could I not like a girl like that? Two peas in a pod. It was rare to find a girl who liked comics back then. Probably even now too.

That one dinner turned into two, then a few more but at local diners and restaurants. I even took her to a fancy place in town just down the road.

Mom always told me to be careful.

She'd mentioned every time ran into Rosemary's parents, or siblings, or even extended family.

She'd tell me whenever Rosemary was at church, too.

She was trying to warn me. Warn me that people would notice if anything happened, but I thought I had it all under control.

The minute we think we're in control, that's the second we lose it.

Now, I did right by her. I never seduced her. I respected the physical boundaries she put up, too. So no, we never had sex.

I wanted to marry her. I did. It was all I could think about. Since seeing her on that road, I hadn't had a craving for red, that need and drive disappeared.

Like I said, she could have been my saving grace.

All I needed was to be close to her, in her presence. There was something about her, something soothing and calming to my soul.

I wanted her more than I wanted to see red - which should say a lot, don't you think?

And then she went away.

One of her cousins was getting married in a different state, and she was asked to be the maid of honor. She left about a month before the wedding to help with preparations, and I thought we'd be fine.

I thought I'd be fine, is what I should have said.

A week after she'd left, that's when the need for red reappeared.

It all started with work. One of the guys did some crazy stupid shit and got hurt. He crushed an arm beneath a wheel, broke the bone clear through the skin, and I was the only one around.

Fuck, it was like a fucking rainbow appeared before my eyes,

and all the colors were there for me. I swear it - I saw all the colors. ALL of them.

Believe me or not, I don't fucking care. My doctors never did, so why would you? They said it was my brain playing tricks, but it wasn't that at all.

I was being reminded of what I was missing. It was like my brain was reminding me of what I'd given up, and it was fucking overwhelming.

I didn't help the guy, not for the longest time. I stared at the blood, at the dirty green toolbox off to the side, at the yellow Ford he'd been working on, and at the navy-blue coveralls, he wore.

I saw all the colors, and it was beautiful.

Then I realized I needed to help the guy out. By the time the emergency services arrived, he'd passed out - either from the pain or the loss of blood, I didn't know or care, to be honest.

By then, all the colors had disappeared, other than the red. He was still bleeding, still alive, and that blood was still a beautiful shade of red, and I realized just how much I'd missed it.

I went out that night. Drove three towns away and took a girl from one of the seedy bars.

I repeated it night after night until I thought I was satisfied.

Mom always left her porch light on, as if she knew what I was doing. I'd honk at her as I drove to the trailer, and the light would soon turn off.

I had to get my fill, you know? I needed to make up for lost time, because there was a lot of time that I'd lost, a lot of opportunities to see red that I didn't take, all because I'd been consumed with something else - or someone else.

The night Rosemary came home, Mom invited us both to dinner.

Before I ran into town to pick up Rosemary, Mom wanted to have a talk with me.

Those 'mom talks' are never good. I felt like a schoolboy being disciplined for putting a whoopee cushion on my teacher's chair. It was fun at the time, but man oh man, when I got home, my ass sure hurt from the wooden spoon in her hand.

There was no spanking involved in that talk but it hurt just as much.

She wanted that to be the last dinner with Rosemary.

She wanted me to break it off with her before it was too late.

She said she knew I had good intentions, but to think about my

true nature. It will come out, one way or another, and is that the man Rosemary was falling in love with?

Mom told me to let Rosemary live a free life, where she could fall in love with a less complicated man.

Mom said all the right things, but she didn't understand.

I tried to tell her that Rosemary was my saving grace, that when she was around, I was the man I always knew I could be.

She didn't believe me.

She told me if I didn't break up with Rosemary, she'd do it for me, and if she had to get involved, we both were going to pay for it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CLINTON TO JACK

I'm a mama's boy, Jack. Always have been. Always will be.

I'm not a dumb man. I know that when Mom speaks, it's best I listen.

I didn't want to listen this time, though.

So I told her what she wanted to hear, that I'd break things off with Rosemary, but the reality of it was, we continued to see each other behind Mom's back.

Now, I should have known better.

Moms have this sixth sense about them. They know when their sons are lying to them. Mine sure did.

I'd like to think it took her a bit, but she probably knew right away I was lying to her, but wanted to give me a chance to prove her wrong.

You probably want to know what happened, don't you?

It's not a story I like to tell. It's probably the only story I wish I could forget.

[Jack here: I remind Clint this will be the last time he ever has to tell the story. He made me promise. I pulled out the needle from my pocket and placed it on the monitor so he could see it. Guess that gave him enough incentive.]

I don't want to live with the memories, so as soon as I'm done...

Thank you, Jack. I know you're a man of your word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CLINTON

Rosemary and I, we liked to drive out to a certain spot in the country.

There was this pond full of cattails, and when the sun set, Rosemary liked to say it was picture perfect.

She was picture perfect, but she didn't like it when I praised her too much. She was beautiful but unaware of her beauty. She was an angel with no idea of the glint of her wings.

At the right time of the year, when the field was full of wildflowers, the fireflies would come out and it was almost magical.

That one night - it was definitely magical.

We shared our deepest, darkest secrets with one another.

Yes, I shared my secret with her. I shouldn't have, but I didn't want to keep anything from her.

Her secret was that she wanted to move away, as far as she could, and live a life that was for herself and not for her family. As the eldest daughter, she was expected to work at their family store, but it wasn't what she wanted to do. She wanted to explore, travel, and see new places...she even asked if I thought I could join her.

I had to tell her I couldn't. That I was the only thing Mom had left in her life, and I would never leave her.

Guess I lied, didn't I? Leaving seems to be the one thing I'm good at.

She had tears.

I'd broken her heart, at least, that's what it felt like.

You ever broken a heart like that? The second it happens, you want to do everything you can to repair the damage. You'll do and say anything to make it all better.

I held her in my arms and listened to the sobs. She cried a flood of tears but eventually settled down. She pulled away, like she was drawing inside herself.

I was going to lose her. I felt it. I knew it.

She said she knew she was never leaving, and she needed to figure out how to be okay with that.

I took her hand and held it ever so softly.

That's when I made the one promise I never should have made. Stupid fool. We're weak when it comes to a woman's tears. Stupid. Fools.

I promised her I'd do everything I could to make a life here worthwhile.

She relaxed. Gave me that soft, sweet smile of hers, as if she trusted me, believed me.

I meant to keep that promise, I really did. With her by my side, I wasn't worried that my addiction would be an issue.

That was my mistake.

Addictions are monsters with destructive forces. They feed on need and will do everything to survive. My addiction...it might be out of sight, might have retreated into the depths of my soul, but it didn't disappear.

I should have known better.

She wanted to know my secret. I could have made something up. I should have, actually. But, you know what they say about men who live in the could have, would have, should have past, right?

They never survive.

I was safe with her, so why wouldn't I tell her?

I wasn't scared. Tells you how stupid of a kid I was, doesn't it?

She knew I was color blind. Everyone in town knew that. At first, she didn't believe me when I told her I could sometimes see the color red. So I proved it. I cut myself then described how the beads of midnight turned into burning inferno of brightness.

Have you ever tried to describe color to someone? You would use other color variations to paint a picture, right?

But what if you're color blind and you only know shades of grey?

I painted my own picture of the brightness of passion, the life within the drop, the smear as shades of beautiful red covered my skin.

She believed me.

She wanted to know more. She wanted to know all of it. When did I first realize I could see red, why I never told anyone?

She thought I could see red all of the time. It took a moment for her to understand I only saw red when it was fresh blood.

I saw when she put two and two together and asked if that's why I used to get into so many fights.

Of course she'd figure that out.

She didn't understand though, the need I lived with, the need that was always there, never satisfied.

She pushed up the sleeve of my shirt and stared at my scars.

She asked if I ever hurt anyone on purpose, other than getting into fights.

I thought of all the women I'd hurt, maimed, killed.

I told her no.

I lied.

She knew I lied. She didn't say anything, didn't call me out, didn't demand the truth, but I could tell she knew because she pulled away, ever so slightly.

I panicked.

Of course I did.

My mouth ran, the words spilled that never should have been heard. If I could take it all back, I would. I would have then. I still would now.

She ran from me. She called me things like monster, terror, killer, murderer.

I could handle names. They meant nothing. They were said in moments of emotion and could be backtracked.

I could have forgiven the names.

I would have.

But then she said something that cut so deep I knew I could never heal.

She told me she could never and would never love an evil man.

I wasn't evil. At least, I never saw myself that way. Anything I did, it wasn't done from evil, it was done from need, desire, passion. I was a good man, though. A good son.

I believed that, deep down. Until she said otherwise.

There was so much...honesty in her voice, conviction that I've never heard before.

She believed I was evil.

She made me believe I was evil and that was something no one had ever done before.

Something snapped inside me.

Do I need to explain what happened next?

No, I didn't think so.

She said I was evil, so I became evil. Evil I've been ever since. Even now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CLINTON TO JACK

Mom knew what I'd done the moment I stepped out of the truck.

She knew, and she shook her head at me and called me a foolish boy.

Her disappointment, that was too much.

I broke down, the first time ever.

Right there, on the gravel driveway, with my mother looking down at me with pity in her eyes.

I'd let her down and was ashamed.

That was the worst feeling of my life, one I will never forget.

You wouldn't either.

Be a good boy, Jack. Be a good boy, and never let your mama down. It's something you'll never walk back from, trust me.

Mama told me there was no going back now. No sense in wasting time wishing I'd listened to her, all we could do was move forward.

She asked where the body was. I told her Rosemary was in the truck.

She told me to treat the body like all others, and to do it quickly if I wanted to stay out of prison.

Once again, I should have listened to my mother.

Foolish boys never learn, do they?

In the barn, I couldn't follow Mom's rules. I couldn't. Rosemary wasn't another body, another person used as a tool for my addiction. Rosemary was my heart, my salvation, and I'd killed her.

In killing her, I killed myself. I killed my future, too.

I needed to hide her, though. I wouldn't do to her what I did to the others. She deserved better.

I drove to the dump site, to my spot.

The police were there, parked right outside the gate.

I knew then, they'd found the bodies.

So I drove away. Drove the back way home, instinctively knowing I couldn't go back home.

I had to bury Rosemary. Then I'd run. I'd run as fast and as far as I could. Mom would understand, I knew she would.

I drove to the backfield, where Uncle Cliff buried his bodies.

She'd be safe there, with them. No one would ever find her, find them...

But they did. They found me.

I'd just finished burying her body and was driving out. I passed our neighbor. Waved, as you do. Then passed a police car. I didn't wave.

There was a chase. I got caught.

Some people say that's when their lives end, once they're caught. Not me. My life didn't end then. It had already ended when I took Rosemary's life.

The days I've lived since then...I haven't lived. I've maintained. I've put in the time until the moment.

That needle there...that will end this nightmare.

Nightmares aren't meant to be lived. They're meant to be feared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JACK

I ended Clint's nightmare, and he died, not with a smile, but with a tear trailing down his cheek.

Why the tear?

I kept my promise.

With a small blade, I cut myself on my forearm.

As the light in his soul dimmed, he stared at the blood from my cut.

I promised him he'd see red as he died, and I kept that promise.

It was just after three in the morning when I left his room.

Told the guard to stay where he was until the body was retrieved.

Ike waited for me.

He didn't say anything. Didn't have to.

I called the Warden and told him.

He called me a fucking asshole, then hung up.

I didn't expect anything else.

PATIENT: CORI

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Dana Cross for helping name those in this confession

CHAPTER ONE

Some people repulse you based on reputation and gossip.

Some people intrigued you based on the same.

Reputation and gossip are all you have in this place.

It can make or break you.

It can determine how your stay in this god-forsaken place is.

For those with a weak reputation, they don't survive.

Those with strength, well...they tend to prey on the weak.

Once you've been here long enough, it doesn't take much to figure out which side of the coin people are on.

There are some whom I know right away I never want to speak to them.

There are some that I know I'll be waiting by their bedside for their death.

I've got a list with their names, have I ever mentioned that before?

I used to keep a notebook for each person, with their names written inside, waiting for the day when they arrive on my floor.

I missed too many of them, on my days off, while out fishing and hunting, while pretending that my life was normal, or what I thought normal looked like.

So I don't label the books anymore, but I do keep a list.

I have a list of those I want to talk with, and those I don't.

I also have a list of those I've never been sure of.

There are some people here who are in the grey area - not strong, not weak. They're not prey, but they're also not the hunters.

I like to call them the drifters. They drift on either side of the line, know how to play the game, and play the teams. They find ways to make themselves indispensable, dependable, and useful when needed.

This next patient is that way.

We're going to call them Cori. It's not their true name, of course, but it's initials for a name I gave them, a name I won't share with you or anyone else.

I don't have to explain myself, either.

Cori isn't special or unique. They are just...there.

They were here before I arrived. They were here as one of my first...experiences, and when that happened, I promised them I'd be the last thing they saw before death came for them.

Was it a threat or a promise? Doesn't matter, does it? Either way, I spoke something into being, and it became truth.

Cori isn't someone I like. They also aren't someone I hate. Attributing emotion to them would be too telling and would take up too much of my energy.

Ever had someone like that in your life?

If you let them in, they can be exhausting. If you try to shut them out, they'll consume all your thoughts. But if you just ignore them, if you shove them to the side and pretend they don't even exist, they can't take hold of any part of you.

Are you curious yet?

I probably should mention that Cori is also one of the few who tried to kill me.

CHAPTER TWO

The circus was in town, and it's all the staff could talk about.

Those with kids requested time off so they could go, hell, even those without kids called in sick when they couldn't get the time granted.

Ike took his wife.

I even took my mom.

The circus was lame, but Mom enjoyed it. I bought her all the sweet stuff - candied apples, cotton candy, caramel popcorn, and even won her one of those cheap scratchy animals from a game.

I went on all the rides and even did the House of Mirrors and the Haunted House, too.

Lame, but fine, I'll admit, it was kind of fun.

The timing of having the circus in town didn't go unnoticed either.

It's also the same time Cori arrived on the floor.

I made sure they were secured nice and tight, with no wiggle room to their hands or feet.

I mentioned Cori had tried to kill me once, right?

They'd made a shiv and tried to slice my throat with it during one of my rounds in the early years. Fucking asshole almost got me too.

I have the scar still, faded now somewhat, but still there, still seen, still commented on.

Ike likes to point it out to newbies. Every fucking time he does it, he says, 'even boss man makes mistakes'.

Fuck him, even if he is right.

Cori isn't someone I knew for sure I wanted their confession. If they arrived while I was on shift, great. If I wasn't, well...I wasn't wasting my time on them.

It's a quiet shift, with the floor almost empty. There's not many of us tonight, but when the call came that Cori is coming my way, the first words out of my mouth are, 'fuck that shit'.

I grab my phone and sent Ike a text. He's at the circus with his wife, so I know he won't come in, nor do I expect him to.

Fucking bearded lady is arriving.

He replies with a laughing emoji, and again I mutter a curse or two his way.

Every circus has its oddities. More so in the past and less now. Now it's all about the tricks and the foods and the games, but when I was a kid, the circus was scary shit full of nightmarish things.

Mom took me once when I was a small one. She has fond memories. I had nightmares.

There was this freaky clown who liked to lift up the woman's skirts as they walked by.

There was this girl who swallowed knives, which was really cool. Then there was this freak with a beard, dressed up in a frilly dress with a corset. She spoke in this high-pitched squeal but had a beard down to its waist. They'd plaited the beard into two braids, and they had the biggest pair of breasts I'd ever seen on someone.

Fucking circuses weren't meant for anything but to garner interest and lead you with more questions than answers.

Cori is the same. They grew up as a carny, having been raised by performers, and they knew that world inside and out. They were raised as the bearded kid, the bearded girl, the bearded woman. Until coming here, they were only known as the Bearded Something.

Out of respect, I won't call her a woman or a man. They once said they were genderless. Their body couldn't decide which gender it wanted to be, and so they respected that.

We were told to respect that as well.

During their trial, they were known for making a statement about the deaths attributed to them.

"The number should be higher, not that it makes a difference."

They were being charged with the deaths of fourteen teenagers, but according to Cori, the number cruised over thirty.

You're probably wondering why I don't care if I get their confession or not, right?

Sure, there are more bodies out there unaccounted for, and maybe, just maybe, I could help the authorities reunite some families.

Do you really think that's going to happen, though? If they haven't said anything by now, they're sure as hell not going to tell me, especially since I was on their hit list for God knows what.

Cori is there for the attention. For the shock value. All they want is a reaction, and I could care less if I give them that or not.

In fact, there's a huge part of me that doesn't want to.

Let them die with no audience.

Let them be alone, without a role to play...after what they did, it's better than they deserve.

Except, there is something I want to know. Something that has always bothered me.

Why the fuck did they try to kill me?

What put me on their hit list, and how the fuck did I get off it?

When Cori had a target, they never missed. They never backed down. They never stopped. Every single person on their hit list - whether it was an inmate or a guard, they all ended up dead by their hands.

So why not me?

It's something I've always wondered.

CHAPTER THREE

I take my time, tended to my other patients first, made sure I made myself a fresh pot of coffee, and drank at least half of it before I headed to Cori's room.

There's a guard posted outside the door. I stop and chat with him for a bit, he brings me up on the latest gossip from downstairs, and I'm once again reminded why I like working on this floor.

The drama is what I make it, instead of what is thrust on me. It's quiet, for the most part, and I don't have to put up with all the inmate shit. I worked hard to get here, and I've no regrets.

I push open the door and am hit with a disgusting waft of decay.

The carny has necrotizing fasciitis, or flesh-eating disease, and looks awful. One arm is a stump, but from what I'm reading on the charts, if death didn't take him first, he'd be losing a leg too.

"What the fuck." I close the door and go raise the window across the room a hair.

"Didn't expect to see me so soon, did you?" The voice, Cori's voice, has always surprised me. It's a little low, but it's got this squeal to it that just hits you wrong, if you know what I mean. When they're particularly excited, it's high-pitched and makes you wince.

At least, I do.

But, when they soften their voice, it's breathless. Get them mad, and they sound like a heavy-handed bouncer at a dance club.

"Figured you had a few more lucky years on you. What the fuck happened?" I give a quick glance at their injuries, and something inside me shrivels. I put on a fresh pair of gloves out of habit, even though I don't plan on touching them.

"Cut from the gym room. Got an infection, no one believed me, and bam, lost one hand, then the arm, and I'd be losing my legs if I wasn't going to die soon. At least I've kept the arm with all the important stuff on it."

Death, for sure, is on their doorstep. It's in the feverish twinkle in the eyes, the shade of red barely covering the white on their cheeks, and the smell of it reeks all over them.

The disease is a fast one. If you don't catch it in time, death is

the inevitable outcome, and it's not a pretty one. It eats you from the inside out, and past a certain point, all you can do is pray that you die fast.

Not sure anyone is praying that for Cori.

They're all probably hoping their death is painful and drawn out.

Not that I blame them. Cori is...one mean son of a bitch and deserves everything happening to them, in my opinion.

"Intentional cut or accidental?" I have to ask, not because there's anything I can do about it, but because I'm curious.

"What do you think?"

Intentional then. Not surprising, either. Cori has enemies, lots of them. He used to be a bigwig down on the floors, a leader, until someone stronger and meaner came along. Truth be told, I'm surprised no one has taken him out before now.

I've heard there'd been lots of attempts. This is the first and only time any of those attempts have been successful. Wonder who was able to swipe the final blow?

"It only took how many years?" I sit my ass down and turn my face away, just slightly. The stench is...overpowering.

"I smell. I get it. Don't need to stick your nose up like some punk ass. Aren't you used to this? At least I haven't shit myself."

"Even if you did, I wouldn't be the one cleaning it up."

Cori snorts. "Once upon a time, you did. Remember that? I sure as fuck do."

Do I remember it? No. I've long since erased it from my memory.

"So, how does this work?" He asks when it's obvious I'm not going to reply.

"This works with you telling me something no one else knows. If I like the story and believe you, I'll make all that," I wave my hands over his body, "all disappear for you."

"Quick and easy, huh?"

I lift my shoulder in a shrug.

"I could tell you anything. Make shit up, even."

I nod. "You could. But then I walk away."

He stares at me as if trying to gauge whether I'd actually do that, walk away.

Hell yes. I've done it before. I have no problem doing it now. Especially considering every breath I inhale makes me want to gag.

“People really do this? Tell you stories, and then you kill them?”

I shake my head. “They don’t tell me stories. They confess. You know the concept, right?”

His eyes narrow.

“I ain’t never confessed to a thing, so why the fuck would I start now?”

Lies.

“That’s not what you said when the jury said you were guilty.”

This time it’s him who does the shoulder shrug.

“Yeah, well, that wasn’t a confession of guilt, that was me clearing the air. They were wrong on their count. If they’re going to say I killed that many people, at least get the numbers right.”

It has always amazed me how the mind of a killer works.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” I lean forward, ignoring the rotten stench, and stare him straight in the eyes.

“You’re going to confession, set the record straight, tell people what really happened and why, and I’ll take the pain away. Or,” I grab the bar of the bed with one hand and push myself to my feet, “or, you can fuck yourself and die in pain. I don’t give a shit which choice you pick, but you’ll pick one.”

I go to leave the room. “I’ll be back in a few minutes to check in. Make your decision by then.”

The second I leave, I breathe out as much air from my lungs as I can.

“Fuck he smells, huh?” his guard says. “Don’t know how you can sit beside the asshole and not upchuck. My skin itches, it feels disgusting.”

“His fucking flesh is rotting, what do you expect? Suck it up and let me know if he makes any noise. I don’t care if it’s a fart, a scream, or him trying to get out of his binds.”

I walk as fast as I can down the hallway, push open the door to the stairwell, and head up the stairs to the roof.

As soon as I open the door, I let the night air envelope me. There’s a breeze, one that doesn’t smell like putrefied meat, and I stand there for the longest time, trying to forget the stench I know coats me like a vat of lard.

CHAPTER FOUR

My few minutes turned into almost an hour.

It wasn't that I was busy, or some emergency happened on the floor.

It was that I was trying to find some Vicks.

Put a dab of that shit underneath your nose, and you're smelling...well, not putrefied puss, that's for sure.

I handed some to the guard standing outside Cori's door and told him to rub it under his nose.

When I entered Cori's room, it helped. It didn't erase the scent completely, but it helped.

Their eyes were closed, and they almost looked like they were asleep.

A nicer person would have left.

No one ever said I was a nice guy.

I tugged at their beard - not too hard, I'm not that much of an asshole, but enough to grab their attention.

"When was the last time you cleaned this?"

Personal hygiene isn't something most people care about in this place, especially at this point, but if you're going to grow a beard, at least take care of it.

It's surprising they let the beard grow this long, to be honest. They've got a barber downstairs who normally keeps the inmates quite trimmed.

I once had a patient with bugs in his beard. He scratched like no tomorrow but never did anything about it. Lice and shit are rampant in this place, and it's disgusting. As soon as he came on my floor, we shaved it off of him. You should have seen the scabs and open sores on his face.

"Fuck off," Cori mumbles. Okay, so maybe they were about to fall asleep.

"Sure, if that's what you want." I go to turn, my hand on the door.

"You're an asshole, you know that, right? What sick jollies you must get treating people like me, huh? What? A little restraints keeping me in place, and you feel like you're king of the world?"

You're king of nobody, especially me."

I open the door wider.

"How long do you expect the confession to be? The pain is unbearable."

"Take as long as you need. Hell, if I like what you're telling me, I can increase the morphine there to help take the edge off."

Cori's eyes lit up at that. Guess I said the magic words.

"You know most of my story. Everyone in this place does. Randy made sure of that."

Randy, another inmate from years ago, knew Cori back in the day. They'd worked in the same circuit together once upon a time. Randy had no problem sharing Cori's story with anyone who wanted to hear it.

Trust me when I say everyone wanted to hear it.

"We both know Randy liked to exaggerate. Why don't you tell me the shit he didn't know about. Unless you tag-teamed, and he was an accomplice?"

"Me, work with that piece of shit? You might as well just kill me now and get it over with."

I snort. We both know I won't be doing that.

Confess or die in pain. Their choice.

Not mine.

CHAPTER FIVE

CORI TO JACK

I've never liked you, you know that, right?

Remember the time when I almost got you? You were on my list, in my crosshairs, and you should have died.

You almost did, didn't you?

Nice scar you have there, Jack. Did it hurt much?

Ever wonder why you are still alive?

I've heard the rumors about you.

Either people like you or hate you.

Me, I hate you. More than you can know.

Ever wonder why?

You took away my best friend. You probably don't even remember, do you?

You don't understand what it's like downstairs.

We come in here with nothing but our reputation, and that reputation isn't something we've created, it's something someone else makes up for us.

Sometimes it's right. Other times it's so far off it's laughable.

My reputation was earned, and I made sure everyone knew of it the moment I entered this hell hole.

I killed my cellmate. Do you remember that?

You should. You were the one who came in and jabbed me in the neck.

You also took something that was mine.

Something I smuggled in, without anyone noticing.

Don't remember, do you? Of course, you don't.

You ended up on my list because you took something away from me.

You got off my list because of a promise I made to someone else.

Got your attention now, don't I?

Like I'm going to tell you. Not right away, at least.

CHAPTER SIX

CORI

This body of mine - it's the source of my greatest strength and darkest weakness.

I grew up fucking hating it.

Wouldn't you? It couldn't decide if it wanted to be male or female, and that, trust me, was a whole fuckermarole of an issue.

Fuckermarole? Who the fuck cares if that's not a word. I used it. It's a word to me. Fuck off.

Tell me, do I look like a man or a woman to you? Get rid of the beard, and you wouldn't have an answer, would you?

One day, it won't matter. One day, this puritan world of ours will accept the fact that not everyone needs to be placed in a category, that people can just be without being assigned a label.

That day isn't today. Or tomorrow. Or even fucking next year, but one day, mark my words.

I grew up a carny. Now, let me make something clear. We're called carny, with a y, and not carnie with an ie. There's a huge difference, and you better get it right with your chicken scratch. A carnie with the ie is someone who doesn't stick around. They come for the thrill, then realize this life ain't for them, and they take off. A true carny embraces the life.

But do you have any idea what life as a carny is like? No, you probably don't.

My house was a trailer. My playground was filled with muddy fields of dirt and mosquitoes.

When I wasn't in school, I was on the road with the family, going from town to town,

If I'd been a normal kid, my life would have been fairly normal. I would have thought I lived the good life, the fun life.

My life wasn't fun.

I was a sideshow piece. An anomaly. While my father owned a food truck, cook during the day for the staff and business owner at night feeding the crowds, my mother dressed up in a Victorian frock complete with laces and gloves and a wig that doubled the size of

her height.

She also had a beard that rested on her large doubled cup chest.

Being born with hypertrichosis isn't a gift. It's not a blessing. It's not the opportunity to decide for yourself who you want to be.

It's a fucking nightmare. A shitty gift from the universe.

My mother knew how to turn the jeers into coins.

If you're wanting a childhood story from me, you're not going to get it.

Life sucked as a kid. I hated it. The only time I was happy was when we were on the road. School was something to endure, not something to look back at with fondness. Fuck that shit.

Puberty hit me fucking early. I was ten when my facial hair started to grow.

Until then, my parents didn't raise me as a boy or a girl. They couldn't.

You know why, it's in my file.

I have a fucking small vagina opening and an even smaller penis.

I'm a fucking anomaly.

For the longest time, I was left alone. I wasn't the rough-and-tumble boy on the field kicking the ball or picking fights. Nor was I the stand-in-a-circle type of girl mooning over the boys on the playground.

I was usually inside during recess, helping out the teachers as much as possible.

The less time spent with kids my own age, the less they teased me.

Hell, if my parents couldn't decide on a sex for me, how do you think they could in school?

Anyway, by the time I was ten, it was out in the open anyway. I started growing facial hair. At twelve, I started growing breasts.

You can put two and two together and figure out what life was like as a child.

I liked to keep busy. I'd help Dad when I could, I'd hang out with Mom when he was too busy. I was fourteen when I started dressing the part and became included in Mom's sphere.

She tried to protect me as much as she could, they both did, but the owners of the carny knew a good thing when it happened, and they were never ones to leave money on the table.

I was okay with it. Don't get me wrong.

It was fun at first. Different. Something I could call mine.

Carny life was all I knew. I sure as hell wasn't a gazoonie, a fucking day man who couldn't handle the work. One day I was going to be the lot man, the one in charge, who made the big bucks on the side. Everyone kissed up to the lot man. But until then, I didn't want to cook behind the grill, I didn't want to be a cleaner, or someone who fixed the rides, or even a builder who put the stalls together.

I realized I liked the attention. Once I got a taste of it, it became air to me. Didn't matter if the attention was good or bad - it was fuel to my fire, food for my soul.

Kids were never kind, though. As teenagers, they were even worse.

I'd get laughed at, made fun of, poked at, teased...anything to make me feel degraded. I tried to ignore it, but it was hard.

I still remember the first time I decided to stop ignoring it and do something about it.

I was sixteen. We were at a county fair in the middle of god knows where, and it was our last night. The place was packed, everyone wanting one last taste of fun before we took off for another town.

It was close to closing, and I was tired.

I was out by one of the tents, in a dark spot, taking a break. I'd snagged a bottle of beer and poured it into a cup and was trying to drown it before anyone noticed.

That's when this guy stumbled upon me. Guy, kid, teen...same difference. He was probably my age, maybe a year or two older, definitely more drunk than I was, and he was alone.

Stupid move. People should never wander the carny alone in the dark.

You think the carnival is full of peacemakers? Fuck no. A lot of them are running from something, someone...most often the police. Here they can hide. Dress up as someone else, blend into the background, and be unnoticeable.

Never trust the dark at a carnival.

When the guy saw me, he started laughing at me and saying the usual things: calling me freak, unnatural, what's it like to fuck myself...you know, the stupid things teenage boys think are cool.

I told him to fuck off. He didn't. He kept up with it all, wanting to see my dick, asking to boob fuck me...so I pushed him.

I didn't think it was a hard push, but it was enough of one. He fell backward and hit his head.

That's all it took.

The guy was dead, blood pouring from a head wound.

You'd think I panicked, right?

Nah. I stood there and watched as the blood drained from his body, mixing in with the mud on the ground.

Standing there over a dead body, it was like something inside me was born.

I wasn't scared, nervous, worried about what had happened.

I didn't panic like a little kid.

I watched. Mesmerized by the power of my actions. One decision on his part, one reaction on mine, and poof, he's dead.

Mom taught me to ignore people when they made fun of me, but why? Why not stand up for myself? Why not put them in their place and open their eyes to what they are: bullies.

There were enough people still out and about, so I pulled the body further into the shadows. I thought about covering him with a tarp to hide his body but decided not to.

If I had, it would make it look like someone was trying to cover it up.

By leaving him there, it looked like some stupid drunk fell and hit his head.

It's hard work moving a body in the mud. I don't advise it.

I didn't tell anyone about him. I just left him there. I figured someone would find him as we were packing up.

Surprisingly, no one did. Not that I heard, and trust me, I made sure to stand by any groups of adults who were talking.

A few days later, I overheard one of the owners complain about visits from the police, but that was it.

I got away with it. My first kill. Quite accidental. One I've kept a secret all these years.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CORI TO JACK

I hear the circus is in town.

A circus is not a carnny. Nor is the carnny, a circus.

They're two very different beasts.

Do you know the difference? Probably not, since people always assume they're the same and lump them together.

Stupid, ignorant people.

A circus is a single controlled event that's built around the structure of animals, clowns, and trapeze artists. People leave feeling like they've seen something magical when really, all they've seen is a facade.

A carnival is where the nightmares rest. It's a living, breathing beast no one can trust. It's full of games, side shows, rides, and con artists.

A carnival will stick around a little too long, but a circus is never around long enough.

Even with their differences, give me a carnival over a fucking circus any day.

Us carnies are real people, not stuck-up snobs with over-imagined egos. So you can swing from a rope. Fucking-do-da.

I know how to convince people to give up their hard-earned cash without a blink of an eye. I can make them believe whatever the fuck I want - it's all in the story I tell.

Child raised by wolves? Sure, I've seen them. They're a main attraction. People like to see how they walk on their hands and feet, how they tear into their prey, and eat their food raw.

It's just an act. It's all a fucking act.

Bearded lady? Well...one look at me, and you know I'm real.

Smallest man in the world? We had a guy who claimed he was an extra on the Wizard of Oz. Or maybe it was his father? Grandfather? I don't remember.

To me, the carnival was home. It's where I grew up, found myself, became a man.

Hell, it's even where I became a killer. That first death might have been accidental, but all the others afterward sure as hell weren't.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CORI

For someone like me, it's safe to say I've got issues.

My father always said there was way too much anger in me. He was one to talk. He was the meanest son-of-a-bitch I knew.

According to him, lazy feet and hands were devil's work, so he kept me busy.

He was on to something. When I was busy, I was focused on other things. Other things like girls and cars and making money.

Oh, I wanted to make money.

I was quite the pickpocket. I still am. I could snake anything from anyone, and they had no idea until it was too late.

My father had a mean right hook, and the only times he used it on me was when I got caught for my thieving. Any other time, he'd grunt, nod his head or even sometimes give me a quick pat on the back as he took in what I stole.

I gave most things to him. I was supposed to give him everything but I'd always keep a bit back.

Call it my own personal tithe. Little by little my piggy bank grew, and it got to a point where I knew my father knew I was holding some back.

Eventually, I got too big for him to punch. Either that, or he figured out I'd punch back.

There sure as hell was no love loss between the two of us. The day he died, I didn't shed a tear, even knowing he died because of me.

Once word got out about me, when I was in prison, they came after my family. Mom was quick to hide. Dad...not so much. A bunch of men beat him to death, and the cops all turned the other way.

Funny how that works, don't you think?

There's always been a sense of unbalance. That's never changed.

Back then...I was the oddity, the weird one. People make fun of things they can't understand and then, no one understood why it was okay for a body not to decide upon a gender.

How is any of this my fault? I was born this way, I sure as fuck didn't choose it.

The smart person knows how to use their disadvantage as an advantage.

Every fucking carny knows that. Use your weakness and make it a strength. Let everyone think they're in control, that they're superior to you...eventually they'll figure out the truth, one way or another.

For me, I did it by stealing and by killing.

The killing was the fun part. The stealing was just work.

Moving from town to town, being set up outside of town where no one keeps an eye, killing became fairly easy.

My targets were bullies.

I only went after the ones who made fun of me. Who thought they were better than me. I quickly showed them how wrong they were.

I never went after the groups. It was always the stragglers, or the ones who were left behind, or the ones who said the carnival was lame and they were out of there.

I'd play my part, do my gig, costume up and bring in some coin. We had quite the show going, Mom and I.

When I was younger, they'd parade me out to the crowds, and I'd be wearing outfits my mom made for me ... one half of the outfit looked like a dress, the other, like pants and a shirt. What gender was I? That was up to the audience to decide.

My favorite show was the theatrical one, where I'd wear different outfits and make people wonder if I was male or female. I'd show off my boobs, and then I'd tear off the skirt to show an endowed cock area.

Most were revolted. Some were intrigued.

I can't tell you the number of times I was propositioned.

Sometimes I'd take people up on it if the price was right. My penis might be small but it still worked.

Don't discount the power of a person with a small penis...they learn other methods of making sure their partners find pleasure.

There were so many areas at the carnival for a quick rut. The private quarters' area was off-limits, but there were enough walkways, side alleys, and dark corners to find some pleasure.

And some pain.

Not every area that we settled in was the same.

Some were just in big mud pits of unused fields.

Others were around baseball fields or horse racing areas.

Sometimes we were far enough from town that there was a wooded area and streams running close by.

I didn't kill someone at every location. That would be stupid on my part.

But it was close. Sometimes more than one person, too.

I got to be quite creative with my methods. Sometimes I'd choke a person out. Sometimes I'd hit just in the right spot that they were out for the count and could be smothered easily. Other times it would be a knife fight.

I didn't always hide the body either.

If there were streams nearby, I'd dump their dead asses in the water.

If there were wooded areas, they'd get lost in the trees, free for whatever wildlife was in the area to feast on them.

A few times I'd dump their body in the bed of some random ass pickup truck and cover them with whatever was available.

Sure, sometimes the police came by.

Sure, sometimes I was questioned, along with everyone else.

But I was never caught, not then.

God, I felt like I was on top of the world, getting away with murder.

I guess, in a sense, I was the ruler of the carny, wasn't I?

CHAPTER NINE

CORI

The why of why I killed is pretty obvious, don't you think?

Because I could. Plain and simple.

This delicate frame had enough strength to do anything.

I might have had an hourglass figure thanks to the corsets Mom made me wear, but I could bench press an elephant, and that's no lie.

These arms came from hard work.

Every carnival has a strongman, right? Well, ours was Benjamin Doyle and he was probably the strongest man in the world. He could benchpress close to a thousand pounds.

He was also my trainer.

He taught me how to fight like a man. How to weight-lift, how to utilize what I had, and made it work for me.

I started joining him on the stage for a time, which was fun.

I probably joined everyone who had a show at one point or another. There were so many skits, they all collide into one now.

There was this one time after doing a show with him, some asshole came up to me and accused me of using foam weights.

I ignored him and walked away. But the guy wouldn't stop. To him, there was no way someone like me could bench that much. I think it was around three hundred pounds, which really, is shit, but it's still, it's more than most average males can bench.

This guy was doing two hundred at the gym and wanted to see for himself how an ape of a being could do better than him.

Fuck him. He still makes my blood boil. The audacity of people to assume if others can do something they can't, then they're liars.

He came into the back area where Benjamin's gym was set up. There were two benches, one for Ben and one for anyone else who wanted to train.

This asshole wanted to see me bench press, but he had to put the weights on.

Sure, what the fuck, right?

So I did it. No problem.

Then told him to give it a try.

We both know how that ended up, right?

He tried once, couldn't do it, then started me a whole slew of names. Faggot. Bastard. Monster.

It was still early evening, so I told the guy to leave.

He didn't, so I walked out on him.

Didn't make a difference. The ass had something to prove, so when I returned, he was at the weights, looking through them all, touching them, lifting them, making sure they were legit and not made out of foam.

We got into a bit of a fistfight. I knocked him to the ground and then proceeded to set the weights down on his chest. Told him if he was so much better than I was, then lift the fucking weights off himself.

He couldn't. He was a fucking weakling.

I kept adding the weights until they equaled the amount I lifted during the show.

I might have lost count. That's probably why in the end, his chest was crushed.

Nah, I know I added too many, but I did it on purpose.

The only issue was how to get rid of the body.

Any ideas on what I did?

I carried the asshole out, snuck past tents and other equipment, and headed to the parking lot.

There was this one truck parked off to the side, all on its own. It had just arrived and when the doors opened, a bunch of teenage assholes exited.

They all jumped into the bed of the truck and started drinking.

I kept watch and waited until they left.

I put the body beneath the truck, at enough of an angle that no one would notice, but that when they drove over the body, they'd do some damage. Before I left, I grabbed two beers. Poured one inside the dude's mouth and then all over his clothes, and then I drank the other one.

I kept an eye on those guys, wanting to make sure I saw when they left.

Now, the best thing about where we were located, it was a rocky parking lot. All over the place were huge boulders that you had to navigate, along with some fairly large stones too. I was hoping the guys would assume the bump beneath their truck was just rocks,

and man, I was right.

The asshole driving gunned it out of the parking lot, not even stopping as they ran over the body.

Even I winced at the bounce of the truck. It was dark enough, they didn't even stop to see what they'd run over, just backed up, spun around with a squeal of tires in rocks, and took off.

The body wasn't noticed until the following morning, and by then, the memory of me getting in a fight with a massacred body no one could identify, well...it never came up.

CHAPTER TEN

CORI TO JACK

I live with no regrets. Why should I?

Everyone I killed, had it coming to them.

They were stupid assholes with a superiority complex.

I knocked them down a few pegs. Not my fault they couldn't get back up on their feet.

My only mistake was maybe doing it too often. Maybe.

Come on, you know how it is. This place is full of people with addictions, and addictions make humans do stupid things.

Killing someone and getting away with it - that becomes addictive.

You, of all people, should know.

Am I right? Do you think you could give up doing these mercy killings of yours?

[Jack here: I told him to shut the fuck up and keep on with his story or I was going to walk out.]

Hitting a little too close to home, I see. Ahh, cool your jets, big man. I'll leave you and your guilty conscious alone.

Word of advice, though? From one killer to another? Find your joy in what you do. Focus on the reason, and you'll be fine. Hell, you might even see those pearly gates one day.

I sure as hell know I won't.

That doesn't mean I didn't find my joy - I just know the likes of me never see the inside of those gates. According to everyone else, we're abominations, grotesque mistakes, and definitely not one of God's creations.

Fuck all them religious assholes.

I killed a preacher once, bet you didn't know about that one.

Of course, you didn't. They claimed it was done by someone else.

[Jack here: I asked him if it bothered him someone else took ownership of his kills. The idea fascinates me ... some inmates I've met hated having their victims stolen from them. Others, they didn't care.]

Did it bother me? Fuck no, why should it?

I was the smart one to use it to my advantage, so why would I care? In fact, several of my victims were linked to other killers. That was me using my brains, that's what that was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CORI

I was probably in my early twenties when we headed to this small town just outside of Springfield.

As we set up, we were told to keep an eye out for anyone suspicious looking.

What suspicious looked like, that's anyone clue. Most of the people at the carnival, if they were there on their own especially, looked suspicious.

I can't tell you the number of pedophiles that use the carnivals as their hunting grounds. It's more than you'd expect, that's for sure.

I always kept my eye out for those bastards. They're not hard to find, not when you know what you're looking for.

They tend to hang out around the gaming booths, searching for the kids who wandered away from their parents. They'd offer to help with the games so they could win a prize. Sometimes it worked. Most of the time, we'd casually show them a gun and tell them to scram, then occupy the kid until their parents started calling out for their kids.

They also liked to hang around the bathroom areas.

I'm sure things have changed now, but back then, kids didn't need mommy or daddy to hold their hand while they went pee. They'd be told to be quick about it and to come right back or no treat, or some other threatening shit.

Which meant that a lot of kids were in those bathrooms all by themselves.

Sometimes they made it out on their own.

Sometimes they didn't even make it in there.

Often, kids would end up missing, all because a parent decided to let their kid piss on their own. Wonder how many parents ended up regretting that? Probably all of them.

So anyway, we set up shop in a town outside the city and truth be told, the crowds were down.

Seems someone in the city had gone on a killing spree and

everyone was too scared to leave their homes.

Not a good time in the carny world, let me tell you.

A bunch of us even went into the city to hand out free ticket flyers, just to drum up some business.

It wasn't until our third, or maybe it was the fourth, night that we actually had a decent crowd.

I remember it being decent because up to that point, Dad was a monster, angry at the world and lack of sales, while Mom tried to keep him calm.

I stayed away from our trailer during that time. Dad could be quite the asshole, and I didn't need him taking it out on me.

If you're wondering if he ever took it out on Mom, the answer is no.

In the evenings, after the lights were all off, Dad would organize a fighting match amongst the men. Bets would be thrown down, faces would be bloodied, but that's how he dealt with his anger.

It was a good outlet. For him, for me, for all of the men who worked the circuit.

Anyway, let's say it was day four. As I walked around the grounds, I'd see my fellow carnies with smiles on their faces. Didn't mean we could relax, though. One good night wasn't enough for the books.

Everyone knew a killer was on the loose, but the carnival was for fun, so we did our best to create the type of experience people needed to forget their worries.

The lights were on, the music was loud, the voices were louder, and if we weren't doing a show or running a ride, we were helping people spend their money on greasy food and unbeatable games.

I was running the Ferris wheel. It's one of the most boring gigs with repetitive movements.

I can't tell you how many times I'd stand there with a pop cup full of beer and start the ride, stop the ride, open the bars, check the bars, and start the ride again...monotonous and boring.

There was this man walking about. He wore jeans, a blue jean shirt, and a tie.

Who the fuck wears a tie to a carnival, especially when they're alone?

He'd pass by me every so often.

Sometimes I'd hear people call out a greeting to him. Preacher Dan, or Dave, or...it started with a D, that much I remember.

He came across as polite and friendly, but there was something about him that was off.

I'd seen his kind before.

His kind is the kind that preys upon kids, steals them from under their parents' noses, and they're never seen again.

So I watched him.

I had a few of the other carnies watch him too, friends of mine around my age.

When I was done my shift, I walked through the park, row by row, even down the back alleys where it was pitch black, seeing if I could find him.

I did.

I saw him walking out of the park through the back entrance, his pace hurried while clutching the hand of a kid who had to basically run to keep up.

It was too late for me to catch up with him, and honestly, what the fuck did I know, right?

Except, not long after, a bunch of adults are rushing around the place, calling for their kids.

A bunch of us offer to help look for him, checking the bathroom stalls, dark corners, and such.

Eventually, I came across the parents who were talking to some security guards. The description of the kid matched what I saw, so I told them about the preacher walking out of the park with a kid in tow.

As soon as I mentioned the preacher, the parents relaxed. Guess they knew him. It didn't make sense why he'd take their child, but he had to have a good reason, right?

Except the next morning, the police showed up at the park to talk to me.

They believed I'd made a mistake. It couldn't have been the preacher I saw. Sure, he'd been at the carnival but left alone and early. They spoke to him after a prayer meeting at the church and he denied everything.

Fuck that shit. Some people are so gullible when it comes to religion.

Guess who showed up the next night?

You got it. Preacher man.

The man seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed comfortable with him. I watched him. Stalked him even. Never let

him out of my sight, even to the point of bribing others to cover my shifts.

He left, but alone that time.

That night, on the radio, we all listened as the body of a young boy was found on the side of the road, heading back to town from our carnival. They claimed the Closet Killer was to blame.

Closet Killer? What the fuck kind of a name is that, anyway? Turns out the first victims found had been hidden in closets. The Closet Killer had escalated, moving from leaving his victims in closets to garages, then to vehicles, and then, apparently leaving bodies in ditches, like that poor kid.

Didn't make sense to me, you know? What the fuck do I know, though, right?

All the news could talk about was how the Closet Killer was escalating.

Do you have any idea what that kind of news does to a business?

You'd think the crowds would thin, and we'd be left having to pack up early. Nope.

That's when a different kind of crowd comes out. The crowd that isn't looking for the smoke and mirrors, the fun music, greasy food, and cheap stuffed animals to win.

That crowd was there for the grotesque, the scary, the nightmarish activities. The music was still loud, but the lights were dimmed. Lines into the haunted house and house of mirrors never ended.

People wanted the freak shows, and as the freaks, we came out to play.

The carnival now belonged to the older teens, the adults, the older men and women who knew what it was like to live a hard life.

Those were my crowds. The rough crowds. The crowds who didn't give a fuck. Who could handle the twisted and the weird, who wanted it even more twisted and dark.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Have I painted a clear enough picture for you?

CHAPTER TWELVE

CORI

The ins and outs of a carny life ain't all that pretty.

Sometimes it downright smells.

Some locations come with outhouses. Some come with large garbage bins.

Sometimes we had to dig a few holes and bury the trash.

The Preacher, he was trash. I knew it. He knew it. Soon the whole town would know it once they put two and two together.

Come on, it was plain as day, don't you think?

Just cause he hid behind religion meant shit, you know? The worst offenders out there are the ones people trust the most.

Look at you for example. Not saying anyone here trusts you, but you didn't always work here, right? I'm sure somewhere people trusted you with their lives, never knowing you really take them in the end, don't you?

[Jack here: I told Cori to shut the fuck off and stop focusing on me.]

One thing us carnies are good at is knowing when the gig is over.

As soon as there was another body, this one a small child...word came out that our run was cut and we had one night left.

We didn't expect much of a crowd, would you?

Surprisingly, we had a good run, just like the previous night, with all the unmentionables, and wouldn't you know it, the Preacher showed up.

I kept my eye on him. Again, he was fucking friendly with everyone, seeming to know all their names and their parents.

No one suspected a thing but me.

We had a trash pit out off to the side that was full. I'd pulled the lot of covering it up before we all moved out - most everyone hated drawing the short stick on that one, but I didn't mind.

I can't tell you how many bodies I'd buried in those trash holes.

As far as I was concerned, there was room for one more piece of trash, if things went according to plan.

Now, I'd assumed the Preacher's tastes went toward the younger crowd, but I was proved wrong.

There were enough teenagers at the carnival that night, wanting their last night of freedom, where no one checked what you were drinking in your cups.

The Preacher seemed to set his sights on one boy in particular. He was thin, kind of small for his age, had messy brown hair, and seemed a little quiet.

I watched them. Watched the Preacher slap the kid on the back, put his arm around his shoulders, and stand close whenever possible.

I also watched as the kid pocketed his hands, slouched his shoulders, and where he had a smile when he was around his friends, but he couldn't look up from the dirt he walked on when the Preacher was around.

Something smelled off. It smelled funky, and I didn't like it at all.

The Preacher took this kid out behind the washrooms.

I followed.

I got close enough I could almost hear what was being said.

Preacher was making it obvious what he wanted.

The kid barely said two words.

I put a stop to that shit real fast.

Preacher, well, he didn't know what to make of me, while the kid ran off real fast.

I was dressed up in my skanky slut outfit, playing a part I knew the crowd would love.

Offered myself up to the Preacher, if he needed to have a little bit of fun, why not with me?

He followed me. I told him I had a more comfortable location, where we could introduce ourselves on a more intimate level.

I made sure to skirt around the crowds, staying on the outside, so no one would see us. I took him to my trailer, a little one-person size piece of shit that gave me my privacy.

While the Preacher was trying to take off his pants, I grabbed a piece of wire and wrapped it around his throat.

When you know what you're doing, it doesn't take long to strangle a person. When you do it with a thin piece of wire, you don't just strangle them, you cut deep into the skin.

I made sure that fucker didn't go after another kid.

My trailer was close to the trash hole, so the most obvious thing for me to do was to haul him out there, hide him under the mound of shit we were burying, and then cover it all up.

Or, I could dump him somewhere and let the world assume the Closet Killer struck again.

My job was done for the night. I'd played my part, did my work, and took a child killer off the streets.

I didn't care who got the credit. I mean...I'd rather no one found out, but...if someone was going to find out, I'd rather not have it come back to me, you know?

Now, there was something extra about our location.

We sat next to a vehicle junkyard. One of those farmer fields where people haul their rusted pieces of junk, you know what I'm talking about, right?

So I decided to haul the Preacher out to one of those vehicles. I left him in an obvious location, his body draped over the back end of a rusted-out Chevy. I even made sure his jeans were down around his ankles. I had found a pair of underwear lying around in the mud close to the washroom, so I stuffed that in his mouth.

Figured I painted a clear enough picture, don't you?

It wasn't until a few days later, we'd already left the area, but over the radio, word came out that the Preacher had been found. They didn't speak too highly of him either, claiming the Closet Killer might have done their small town an act of service.

Amen to that, don't you think?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CORI TO JACK

I'm not going to lie, I've always wondered if I'd ever meet the Closet Killer in here, face to face, so to speak.

I know there are a lot of prisons out there. Hell, there are even a lot of these psychotic asylums too, aren't there? The odds of us ever meeting were nil, but the hope was still there.

I never did meet him.

Did you?

Of course, you won't tell me, will you? You're known for keeping secrets, so why should this be any different?

Doesn't really matter in the long run, I guess. Who the fuck knows, maybe we'll have a cell together in hell.

Remember how I said you stole something from me?

Interested in hearing about that?

Yes, it has to do with another kill, if that's what you're so bothered about.

You wanted to know why your life was spared...I'm ready to tell you.

Before I do...can you give me another hit? The pain is a little too intense for this story.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CORI

You love your mom, don't you?

You'd do anything for her, I bet.

If she were to call you right now, you'd take her call. And if she said she needed you to help her with something, you'd either leave now or tell her you'd be there shortly.

You'd do whatever she needed to be done. Because she's your mom.

I was like that for my mom too.

I'd wear whatever costume she made. I'd play the part in any gig she asked. I'd work the jobs she suggested and I tried to live a life she could be proud of.

Minus the killing part.

She was never to know about that part of me. What child wants to see the disappointment on their mom's face? I never did.

I made sure to always check in on her. Sure, we worked together, but once I moved out of their trailer and into my own small one, things changed.

I was out of the line of fire for my old man, which meant he wasn't so angry all the time.

Things were quieter at home, she told me.

I was glad. I really was.

My father was a prick. An asshole. But he loved my mother, so I'll forgive him most of his faults.

I don't want you to think I didn't love or respect the man. He was my father, of course, I did.

Once, when I was helping the old man out in his food truck, a customer came along with attitude.

He ordered food - a burger and fries. Returned the burger saying it was overcooked. I told the asshole to take a hike, ready for a fight, but my old man stepped in to make the peace and offered the jerk a new burger.

We couldn't just give product away. They cost us money to buy and make, and it was a carnival, for fucks sake - you don't expect

amazing food, you eat what you buy and suffer the belly ache later.

This meathead didn't just take his burger and enjoy the rest of his night. Fuck no.

He walked around the carnival spreading vicious rumors about our truck and our food. He stayed within eyesight and stopped most people to were coming up to us for food.

Fuck that shit. We weren't going to make quota for the night if something wasn't done about that asshole.

I went out and got right in his face, not caring if fists started flying. Told him to get the fuck out, that if he knew what was good for him, he'd leave the carnival and find some other joint to hassle.

He didn't like that.

I don't know if it was the fact a freak was standing up to him, or that a freak was doing so in public. Either way, he had issues with me being a freak and couldn't decide if I was a bitch or a bastard.

Considering I was wearing a halter top with overalls didn't help. My boobs were on display and I know how much of a turn-on those can be.

A crowd formed around us and I was getting ready for a good brawl in the mud.

He threw the first punch, I threw the second and then I heard Mom's voice yelling over the crowd, telling me to stop, that this wasn't how a lady was to act.

She spoke in her high-pitched southern voice, so I knew right away she was hoping we'd put on a show and step away from the ring.

I sighed and stepped back, letting the asshole throw a punch right at my nose, breaking it.

You ever had your nose broken? Of course, you have.

Me too. More times than I would like to admit. That fucker hurts, not to mention the blood that stains everything. You like getting blood stains out of clothing? It's not fun, let me tell you.

Mom ran over to me, shielding me as if I were her ugly duckling, and started tearing a strip off the man.

Most people would have the decency to back away. I mean, you don't fight with women, especially mothers.

My mom wasn't like most moms, though. She looked like me. Boobs and a beard. She's either someone you laugh at, stare at, or fight with.

Mom was never really a fighter. She preferred to use her words

than her fists, the complete opposite of me, I guess you could say.

She also chose a gender, whereas I've always refused to. If my body couldn't, why should I?

Guess you can imagine what that fucker did, right?

If he couldn't swing at me, he'd swing at Mom. Got her good too, good enough to loosen her grip on me. The asshole kicked her in the ribs, breaking a few in the process before anyone could stop him.

The second my old man got involved, the guy was as good as dead. It took four guys to pull my father off of the asshole and then another four to help haul his body off the carnival grounds.

I followed them. They dumped his body just outside the entry area.

The guy just laid there and no one really cared.

Sure, we were in the boonies, a small town in the middle of nowhere, but someone must have known the guy, you'd think, right?

I stood with Frank who not only ran the ticket booth but was known as the advance man, meaning he took care of getting the licenses, greasing the wheels of local authorities. Basically, he was the guy who kept the carnival running and he wasn't a man you wanted to mess with.

He was the one who suggested I help the jerk see if he could find his car.

If he was stupid enough to drive home, that was on him.

Sure, I had no problem doing that. I didn't plan on letting him leave though.

I helped him, slung my arm around his back while his was around my neck, and we walked through the parking lot. He tried to tell me where his car was parked, but his jaw was broken so it was hard to understand him - not that I would have listened anyway.

After walking around for ages, tiring him out, I carried him past the parking area to an empty field.

Sure, I might have hit him a few more times, adding to the damage my dad did.

And sure, I might have stomped on his neck hard enough to do permanent damage, but hey, you can't blame me, can you? The guy attacked my mother.

No one attacks my mother and walks away alive.

When his body was finally discovered, we tightened our ranks, as carnies do. The police didn't get an answer from any of us and apparently, there was no one willing to point fingers either.

One more death to add to my list. If the police had really cared, they would have figured things out. Guess it helped the guy didn't have the best reputation either. He was known as the town drunk, a wife-beater, and above average asshole.

No one was going to miss him. No one seemed to care he was dead.

Don't bother asking me his name. I don't remember it.

Mom though...Mom figured out what I'd done.

Only Frank knew I'd walked the guy out. He never said a word. He looked at me differently afterward, like I'd finally lived up to his expectations. Felt good to see that pride in his gaze. It wasn't long after that Frank started using me to help take care of business if you get what I mean.

Mom waited for me in my trailer, having clean clothes sitting on the counter for me.

Told me to clean up and then we'd have a talk.

I fucking hated her talks. I hated getting in trouble, seeing the disappointment on her face, the hurt in her eyes. I knew she knew and I fucking hated it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CORI TO JACK

Mom, she didn't like what happened. Let me make that clear.

She told me straight up she didn't want to know if that was my first body dump or my last, but either way, it was over.

She made me promise. I fucking hate promises.

Obviously, I broke that promise and have hated myself for it ever since.

That's the only thing I feel guilt for, Jack. Nothing else.

As soon as I broke it, I knew I'd done the unforgivable, that I'd crossed a line I shouldn't have.

Mom didn't know right away, of course she didn't. I was pretty good by that time at hiding things.

But she found out the night I got caught. The reason I'm here is because of her.

She gave me something of hers that night, that something that you took from me.

It wasn't much, but it was hers and then it was mine and then you tossed it in the fucking trash.

Still have no clue what I'm talking about?

Mom took something out of her pocket and placed it in the palm of my hand.

I knew right away what it was.

When she'd been a small child, her mother had given her a small rock to carry. Every time someone made fun of her, every time she was teased, every time she cried from how hurtful others could be, she was to hold that rock in her hand and remind herself that deep down, she was this rock, solid, immovable, and a little rough around the edges.

Over the years, she smoothed those edges right down.

She gave me that rock to remind myself that even miracles can happen with a simple stone. I might be rough around the edges, but she knew my heart and my heart was as smooth as the rock in my hand.

It was a bunch of bullshit, but it was a gift from my mother.

A fucking gift you tossed away like a piece of garbage.

That's why you ended up on my list.

That's why I fucking wanted to kill you.

But a promise was a promise, and so now I'm here, where you are going to kill me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CORI

A promise is a promise. It took me breaking my promise to my mom for me to realize I never wanted to do it again.

I can count on one hand the number of promises I've made since then.

Three. Three fucking promises, and sparing your life was one of them.

You jabbed me in the neck after I killed my cellmate.

When I woke up, I was strapped to my bed, unable to even lift my ass to fart, and in walks the fucking Warden.

Surprise surprise, right?

He didn't make many visits, so I knew I was fucked.

Told me the only power I held was in thanks to him, because he allowed it.

I was going to argue but I knew it was pointless. The Warden has a tight grip on this place, on every fucking person in here whether you're staff or inmate.

You know that right? Of course, you do.

No one shits in the nice stall without his permission.

He told me I had two choices ahead of me. I could either agree to his terms and continue as I've been, holding onto my reign of terror with a tight fist, or I could be reduced to a sniveling mast and live the rest of my days in a catatonic state. It was my choice but I only had a minute to make it.

It was a no-brainer, all I needed to know were the terms.

I had to take you off my kill list and make sure no one ever went after you again.

What the fuck? Like what the actual fuck?

What the hell did you do to get the Warden to protect you like that? I didn't get it.

I think I do now, though.

You wouldn't be doing what you're doing without his approval. There's obviously something in this for him, am I right? What? Do you tell him where the bodies are buried? Does he get to help

grieving families end their nightmares? You do the nasty and he takes the credit, am I right?

I had to fucking promise him to keep you safe. You've had a guardian angel protect you in this fucking place where no one is protected.

Everyone is scared of you, you know that right?

It's a reputation well deserved. Kudos man. Kudos.

Just hope you realize with me gone, there's no one else looking out for you now. You're fair game until the Warden steps back in... if he does.

So, you might have a reputation, but you need to watch your back.

You ain't safe anymore, Jack. You ain't safe no more.

Hey, do me a favor? You got a marker on you or something?

I need to add a notch to my tat, right there. See it? Yeah, that one. Just a line, don't care where. I'm sure as fuck counting my death as one of my own - even if technically it's yours.

Do you track your kills, Jack? You should.

Talk to Mark in the kitchen. He can hook you up.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

Cori died at eleven minutes past two in the morning.

I let Cori have their last word and then I gave him that extra dosage of pain meds.

Truth be told, I couldn't handle the smell any longer.

I'm still trying to process what Cori told me at the Warden.

If he thought he was scaring me, he did a lousy job of it.

If someone wants to come after me - let them.

I don't need the Warden or some freak to keep me alive. Fuck them both.

PATIENT: SISTER ROSE

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

CHAPTER ONE

If you were raised Catholic, then you'll appreciate this next confession.

I wasn't raised Catholic, but working in a place like this, I've had enough dealings with priests and nuns to last me a lifetime.

We have a nun on staff. Have I ever mentioned that? She works down in the nursery and has for close to thirty years. She will also come up here to administer last rites if needed.

Sister Ellie is a petite woman with the personality of an ox, if you can picture that. She might look like a brush of a feather could knock her sideways, but when she digs in deep, heaven and hell know to move out of the way. She's stubborn as hell, meek only when she wants to be, but she's also the fiercest protector of those girls downstairs, that I've ever met.

I quite like Sister Ellie.

I'm not sure how I feel about Sister Rose, however.

Sister Rose is everything Sister Ellie is not.

She may be a nun, she may appear to be meek and mild-tempered, but make no mistake - Sister Rose is an inmate in this Asylum, whereas Sister Ellie has chosen to spend her life here in the service of those who need her.

Sister Rose has done things most of us wouldn't be able to stomach.

I know I can't.

And yet, years ago, I promised my mom that I'd treat each woman under my care as if they were her.

I've tried to do that. It's not always easy since some of these women are real...witches, minus the crystals and brooms, but for the most part, I do my best.

CHAPTER TWO

It's a Tuesday evening, quite early in the shift, when I get asked to join Sister Ellie down in the nursery.

The nursery is on the fifth floor and houses the kidlets - the inmates who live in a state of childhood. There's usually between five to seven of them in total and they've got their assortment of body guards and caretakers.

Don't let the name of the floor fool you. Working in the nursery isn't an easy task. You've got the bodies of adults living with the minds of toddlers and children. You can't just pick them up and put them in a time out when they're having a temper tantrum.

Trust me on that.

I've got a scar on my back from trying to do just that, once.

There's a huge difference between my floor and the nursery.

Mine smells like death. It looks like death. Hell, it even tastes like death. Everything is dirty, dark, and the moans and groans that slip through the mouths of the dying, haunt you.

The nursery is different.

It's open space. It's bright, well, brighter than my floor, at least. It has windows. It's noisy with cartoons and singalongs and patients making all sorts of sounds. It's busy with an exhaustive energy to it.

Don't get me wrong. It smells of shit and piss and the moment you open the door you're hit with a waft of something downright vulgar. It's not all roses down here, but at least it's the land of the living and not the dead.

I used to come visit the nursery on a regular basis, back when Bucket was alive. It was refreshing to me, like jumping in a cold lake on a hot summer day.

Today, there are four patients sitting in the common area.

One is playing with huge ass blocks.

One is drawing with crayons at a table.

Another is sitting in front of a television watching a documentary on baby animals, which, is kind of cute. There's an baby elephant playing in water and to be honest, spending even fifteen minutes watching that would do any soul some good.

The last one has a nurse checking on a bandage covering some

sort of neck wound.

Sister Ellie is at the nurses station and she beckons me over.

"It's been a long time, Jack."

She looks tired. The bags beneath her eyes are more pronounced that I'm used to, but I was raised never to comment negatively on a woman's appearance, so my lips are sealed.

She rolls her shoulders before placing a file in her hand down on the counter. She picks up a cup of coffee and gives a little grimace.

"One day I'll drink my coffee while it's still hot," she says. "This is my second cup I've let go cold."

"Honestly, I thought you were more of a tea person. Weren't you the one trying to get me to drink that god-awful ginger tea?"

A slow smile grows on her face. "Some days are meant for coffee and today is one of those days." She glances around the room and then smothers a yawn.

I glance around the nursery and remember the last time I had been down here: it was to bring Bucket an outfit for one of her dolls.

"It's over there." Sister Ellie points to a shelf behind the nurses' station, as if reading my mind.

Ahh. There it is. High on the wall is a shelf with items the staff keep of the kidlets. Bucket's doll sits on that shelf. I try to hide the smile, but from the way Sister Ellie places her hand on my arm, I know she sees it.

"We all miss her, but she's in a better place now, one with all her babies."

"She sure as hell better be."

I hear Sister Ellie's slight tsk-tsk. The words of apology are on my tongue, but I clamp my lips tight.

"God loves the broken, the innocent, the children among us. Let the children come to me, and we all know, Bucket was still a child in God's eyes."

A child in a woman's body. A woman lost in the mind of a child. Bucket was special, no doubt about that.

"Do you need help with anything?" There has to be a reason Sister Ellie asked me to come to her, rather than come visit me herself.

"We had a bit of an incident last night," she says as she looks toward the other nurse, "so I didn't want to leave the floor just yet."

I want to ask. She wants me to ask.

So I don't. Ain't my business.

"You're about to fill a bed upstairs fairly soon, I hear," she says since I remain silent.

One of my brows lift. How does she know? I haven't heard a thing.

"Sister Rose."

Two words from her.

One curse from me.

"You can't give her the deal, Jack. You don't want that on your soul."

I almost laugh. Almost.

"I already promised it to her," I say.

Sister Rose and I had a chat a few years ago. There's things she needs to say, to get off her chest, and I'm a good way to do so.

"She says confession is a healing balm to the soul."

Sister Ellie nods. "She needs to confess to God. Not to man. Her sins are between herself and the Almighty."

"Well, you can't hear her confession, can you?"

Her head drops as if the sadness of what she's about to say is too heavy a burden.

"You're right. I can't hear her confession and absolve her of her sins. I can only offer spiritual direction rather than sacramental absolution."

"Is a priest coming I don't know about?" I highly doubt that is happening. The amount of red tape it would take after the last priest who came to hear a confession, stabbed a patient...let's just say it won't be happening.

Once again, Sister Ellie reaches out and touches my arm.

"Please, Jack. I'm asking you not to hear her confession. She's not penitent and anything she says to you would just be for more self-glory."

I pat Sister Ellie's arm. "Sounds to me like this is an issue between the two of you."

The only one who tells me what confessions I can hear and not hear is the Warden, and even then, I don't always listen to him.

"Nothing she tells you will help the Warden."

It's like the woman can read my mind.

"Then that's between you and him." I hold up my hands, making clear I'm not getting in the way.

"If what you say is correct, then I need to head back upstairs

and get a room ready. Will you be coming to administer last rites?"

She shakes her head and I can tell from the look in her eyes, she's bothered.

"Sister Rose has requested that I don't. She will make her own peace with God and leave it in his hands to accept her repentant heart or not."

A nun not wanting last rites? I can't say it doesn't surprise me, considering who the nun is.

"I'd like to be there though, at the end, so she's not alone."

I promise her I'll send word and head back upstairs.

Ike is waiting. "Just got the call that—"

"Sister Rose is coming to join us." I finish for him. "Sister Ellie just gave me the heads up."

"The room is getting prepped. I didn't put her in Buckets old room, hope you don't mind."

There's a small part of me that wants to suggest we be nice.

It's a very small part of me. Once you meet Sister Rose, you'll understand why.

Don't let the woman fool you, that's all I'm going to tell you. Anyone can appear sweet and innocent, sprouting scripture while screwing you in the ass.

Just saying.

CHAPTER THREE

Who would have thought a nun would be a serial killer.

I try not to think about what I know she's done in the past and just focus on the fact she's now my patient.

My patient who deserves the best care as her body slowly welcomes death.

Every patient that joins me on my floor deserves the best care.

Considering she's the only patient on my floor at the moment, there's no excuse not to give her the best care.

Before I can go visit with my new patient when she arrives, I need to make sure my staff are adequately taken care of: AKA given their assignments.

The newbie is going to be scrubbing floors and walls.

One is going to be taking stock of all supplies and equipment. It's been on my list for a while, so this shift is the perfect opportunity.

Two of the others will be heading down to the other floors to help mitigate where needed.

Ike will stay where he is, overseeing the two with their tasks and running things while I chat with Sister Rose.

You'd think he gets off easy but that's not true. I know him. He'll be helping scrub the walls, giving tips to the newbie while he trains them and making the other redo their count just for the heck of it.

Unless an emergency pops up - it should be a nice and slow shift and I'm more than okay with that.

I'm sitting at my desk, waiting for the phone to ring. The Warden should be calling any time now to give me instructions on Sister Rose.

She's quite popular in this place.

She's one nasty piece of work too, considering all she's done. No one knows the half of it. There's been a lot of speculation regarding her actions, but a lot of what people have heard has been rumors.

She's here, not because she was convicted of any crimes, but because she wasn't.

She came here because this was the only place to send her, where she could get lost and forgotten.

Sister Rose isn't just a serial killer. She's also a cannibal and was deemed a risk to herself and everyone else around her.

Sister Rose didn't have a cellmate when she first arrived. In fact, she's never had one her whole time here. She doesn't participate in any group activities, have many friends, or offer comfort in the name of Christ.

She's not even a practicing nun anymore.

Even if I was told not to hear her confession, I wouldn't listen. The Warden can threaten me all he wants, but Sister Rose promised me years ago a story to make the hair on my arms stand at attention, and I've been waiting all this time for that story.

She's lived around the globe, in cloisters, in native huts. She's worked closely with the Vatican and with the priestess of villages in places you couldn't even pronounce.

Fuck yes, I want to hear her story.

I know the Warden will want too as well. I know it deep in my bones.

Sure enough, as soon as that phone rings and I answer it, that's exactly what I'm told to do.

"I don't care what you have to threaten, I want to it all, you hear me? Every God damned incriminating story she has to tell. I don't care if it's from our shores or somewhere else in the world, I want to know what she did with all the details."

Told ya.

CHAPTER FOUR

SISTER ROSE TO JACK

We've come full circle, haven't we Jack?

It's so nice to see you, after all these years. I trust you're well? You certainly look it.

Don't worry, I don't expect you to say the same. Time hasn't been kind me to, old friend, and I know it.

Thank you for coming to be with me in my final hours. I could be alone, well, I should be alone, considering everything.

This little mercy warms my heart.

Do you remember our last conversation?

You said something to me that has settled it's claw into my soul and won't leave me alone.

I initially thought it was meaningless, but you knew what you were doing, didn't you?

We are two peas in a pod, did you know that?

We're both angels of mercy, aren't we?

Oh, I know, you wear the angel of death cloak quite well, but what you provide is an act of mercy.

I was no different.

We both kept...gifts...from our acts. You write in those notebooks of yours.

Me, well, I kept something smaller, for sure. I wanted to keep something that was personal. Every person deserves to be remembered after their death, but objects people own aren't memorable, not really. Not like something that is part of them.

Did you know our fingernails take forever to decompose, especially when stored properly? Sure, they dry out and become brittle, but I never lost one. I'm sure they're still around, in some file box, stored at some forgotten about storage facility, where no one knows or cares about them, and that's a shame.

I didn't take them so they could be forgotten about.

I took them so they would be remembered.

I have dedicated my life in easing the pain of those who serve God. It's a heavy calling that not many can carry, but for those who are

called, there's no other burden I'd want to be responsible for.

You're calling is just as heavy, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes, Jack. You can't hide it, not from someone who understands, trust me on that.

Listen, I have one request before we start, is that okay?

I do not want Sister Ellie anywhere near my body before, during or even after my death. Please?

She doesn't understand me or the way I lived.

I sadly, all too understand the life she has lived and is living, and she hates that.

We've had enough discussions for me to know that I don't need her here.

What I have to say is between me and God. You're just here to document, no offense.

Proverbs says that whomever conceals their sins doesn't prosper, but if you confess and renounce, you will find mercy.

I've lived my life according to that scripture verse.

Sister Ellie...she doesn't agree.

CHAPTER FIVE

SISTER ROSE

I always knew I wanted to serve God. Even as a small child.

Becoming a nun, taking on the name Sister Rose, it was an honor, a privilege.

I was different than the others though.

I'm not going to get into what life was like back then, it's not worth it.

Me saying I was different, is more than enough.

I didn't want to live an ordinary life in a cloister with my fellow sisters. I was meant for more than that.

So I traveled. I spent a life overseas, working with different organizations. I didn't want to stay with the usual culprits the church worked with. I wanted to be more hands on, with the people, amongst the people.

That's where Jesus would have been, after all. Sure, he would have let his disciples set up a group charity that helped certain people, but while they were off being busy and looking important, He would have been out amongst the people who needed him, helping them, healing them, feeding them.

We're all called to be God-like, aren't we? To be Jesus-like? We're all sons and daughters of the same God, after all.

Even if you don't believe that.

I'll try not to get too preachy here on my death bed.

I went where I was needed and it felt wonderful. No, I'm not being prideful, I'm just stating a fact. When I look back, and we all have to look back at some point, I know my Father in heaven will say 'well done, my child'. That's a good feeling to have.

Sister Ellie doesn't agree with me, but it's a good thing we serve someone who sees past our own shortcomings, don't you think?

We learn life lessons all along the journey.

We learn that life isn't fair. That we don't get a pain-free life just because we believe in God. That truth and justice doesn't always win.

Most of all, we learn that pain can and should be used as a tool

for good and for growth and for God's glory. Even Romans says that we should glory in our suffering because then it produces perseverance, character and even hope.

We all need hope. But before that hope within us can bear any fruit, there first must be pain.

At every stage of my life, this has been a constant theme.

I know you believe in it too. Everyone does. We don't learn lessons through ease and joy. We learn them through pain and torture - torture of the mind, of the heart and yes, sometimes of the body.

I saw this in action in a small village in Ghana where I lived for over a year.

If you've never had the privilege of being overseas, of living amongst the people, you're missing out.

Being a tourist shows you nothing of the world. You need to be a student of the world, the world that God gave to us. After all, He's the great teacher, isn't he?

This small village was full of amazing people. They called themselves the...oh, dear, I can't seem to remember it now...but that doesn't matter. They were a small village, less than one thousand in the area. They were small but so mighty. I learned so much in that village - how much I didn't need to be happy, how my worries were nothing compared to the joys of the universe around us, how we are here to serve, not to be served. Even the little children, only a few years old, knew they were born to serve. Not to serve God, or people, but to search the earth and what all she gave in resources.

It was probably the most beautiful time of my life there.

I went with a medical team, and I was there to provide comfort, prayers and support. But when the team left, I stayed behind.

Why? Because I think deep down I knew there were things missing from my life and these people seemed to know the answers.

They were poor but didn't know it.

They were without and yet lacked nothing.

They were sick but held no fear of death, knowing the energies from their decaying bodies would feed the soil and in turn, take care of their families.

Most of all, they knew the value of pain. Not just the value, but the joy of it.

Most people sound surprised when I tell them there is joy in

suffering, that pain can be pleasurable. It's the truth however, and even Jesus lived this when He was on earth.

Without knowing his name, without knowing the truth of their existence, they lived closer to the life Jesus wanted us to live than anyone else I've ever encountered.

These were the true Christians and if I could have stayed with them for the rest of my life, I would have.

Every culture has their own rituals, and this tribe was no different.

Have you ever wondered at the braids in my hair? No, it's not a style statement, it's an honor badge I wear with pride.

Pain is the path to enlightenment, and when you walk through a pain journey, you receive a strand of braid. The more braids, the more journey's you've walked, and your hair can only be braided by the high priestess.

Even small children, can receive braids. The more intrinsic the design in your hair, the higher status level you receive.

All because of a pain journey.

Notice I don't say the pain journey, that would indicate there's only one journey to walk.

A pain journey can be anything from physical pain to emotional pain. As long as there is a journey of pain with a growth outcome.

The high priestess would visit you and complete a sacred ritual. How and what she says is a secret I will keep to my grave, but it is more powerful than the sacrament of communion, to me at least.

There are only two things that can produce banishment from the tribe: taking a life without cause and cutting someone's braid off.

The only time someone's hair is cut is when they are banished or when they are dead.

Cutting off the braid had to be done at the moment of death, by a loved one, and that braid would then be kept, and passed down through the generations as a reminder of that loved ones essence.

A pain journey was where I discovered the true nature of Christ and what it means to serve God.

Each person in the tribe must complete a ritualistic pain journey on their birthday. Every year.

This journey is the same for each tribe member and it entailed suffering of the body in ways you'd deem as torture.

They would be flogged for the number of years they lived on top of the soil. They would go through a water purification test, which

is basically water boarding. They would receive wounds that would later be inked over with an image received during purification. Finally, they would get the pinkie nail on their dominant hand inked with a design the priestess assigns to your family.

Now, you'd think inking a fingernail might hurt, and normally it doesn't. Unless the priestess decides you need more pain in your pain journey.

Once the ink is done, that nail is ripped off the finger and then displayed within your family home.

The more nails covering your walls, the more blessed your family is.

The moment my own nail was ripped off during this ceremony, I was given a vision from God, a vision that changed my path and made me the woman I am.

CHAPTER SIX

SISTER ROSE TO JACK

That explains my thing for nails, don't you think?

My greatest epiphany came from having my pinkie nail removed.

Have you ever lost a nail? A man like you, I'm sure you have.

In our society, men usually lose them from construction or fights. I bet you've experienced both.

Don't ask me how I know. The moment I mentioned the nail got ripped off, you flinched.

Only someone who has experienced that pain can truly understand it.

My epiphany was that God wanted me to bring salvation through pain back to His children.

Not just any child though. The wayward devout who dedicated their lives to God.

Children like me. Priests. Nuns. Pastors. Spiritual educators.

Even we can lose our way. Unfortunately, when we do, it can have lasting ramifications on those we serve.

The sheep watch what the shepherd does. They watch, they evaluate and they change their course, depending on their shepherd.

When we lose our way, what message does that send to those who are watching us? Who rely on us for spiritual guidance?

Yes, we are held to high standards and so should we be.

I stayed in that village and learned from the priestess for another six months before it was time for me to leave. In that time, the things I learned about the art of pain would blow your mind.

Regardless of your pain tolerance, our bodies can withstand more than you think possible.

I've found this to be particularly true for those who have a deep need for repentance and forgiveness. Especially those who don't recognize that deep need inside themselves.

Those were the ones I was called to help. It became my...speciality.

For someone who isn't Catholic, I'm not going to try to dig in and explain things in fine detail. I'll spare you that.

So I'll generalize a lot of my phrases and explanations, is that okay?

I'd rather not spend my time answering your questions and just tell you my story.

No, I didn't think you'd mind that too much, Jack.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SISTER ROSE

I left that village and traveled to another one, a world away with a completely different cultural mindset.

This group lived close to the earth as well, honoring it, worshipping it. They also worshiped a deity in the heavens, a God-like entity that created everything.

Even though they didn't know of the man we call Jesus, their belief system was close enough to the Christian belief system that you'd think they had to have been visited by missionaries at some point.

They even partook in communion...in a way.

I know I've been called a cannibal and it is true, I have eaten from my victims, but there's a reason for that.

It's from what I learned living with this group. Trust me, it's not so different then when we take communion.

In a nutshell, in the Christian faith, communion represents remembering Christ through the representation of his body and blood. The body is now a ridiculous cracker and the blood is some sort of grape juice or wine. Once a priest prays over it, it's supposed to magically transform but we all know that's ridiculous. What we do now in the church is a show of symbolism and that's it.

That's not what communion is supposed to be about. The purpose of communion is to commemorate the death of Christ - basically to remember him, his acts of service and to come together as a group to honor him and his life.

In this village, they did the same. When any died, they would take some of their blood and place it in a bowl, as well as cut some flesh and place it on a platter.

To honor that person, the matriarch of the community would sing a song of their life, sharing with everyone who that person was. While she sang, everyone would go and take a sip of blood and eat a small piece of their flesh.

They would do this to ensure that person's memory was never gone. By consuming them, they now live within, never absent,

always present.

Don't shake your head. What you consider cannibalism has just been a very common way of life for thousands of years. Where do you think Jesus got the idea from, huh?

My victims were never random. They were always assigned to me - whether by God himself or by his servants in the church.

Let me be clear - I never took a life because I considered it fun, or was addicted to the high that followed or because there was this deep insane need for me to hold that level of control over another person.

I did it because that's what I was called to do.

Every life is precious. Even the vilest of sinners. God loves everyone the same and gives us all the opportunity to repent of our sins, regardless of what we've done.

Some need more help than others to understand their need for repentance. That's where I came in.

But for most every life I took, I also knew I needed to honor them.

Not everyone deserved to be honored and remembered though, keep that in mind. Maybe those will be the ones I tell you about...

Anyways, I would drink some of their blood and eat some of their flesh.

I would pray over it first, asking God to cleanse the blood and flesh from any sickness and unrighteousness and then I would honor their memory by adding their essence to mine.

There's nothing disgusting or sick about that.

I'm not even sure how anyone found out about it, to be honest.

It's not like I left teeth marks on the body. I would carve off a piece of their skin - usually from their arm or leg, but that could have been for any number of reasons.

I only ever told one person about what I did. I thought that person took my secret with them to the grave when they died, but I was obviously wrong.

Well, now that I think about it, I did write it in my journals. For every life, I wouldn't sing a song about who they were, but I would write about them in a special notebook. The Vatican has that book though, they took it from me before I was taken into custody. They said it was to preserve the work I'd done and to protect me.

I believed them. Even when I knew I shouldn't. But why wouldn't I? The work I did - it was sanctioned, it was holy and it

was blessed by God.

We all hold a role within the church community. Sister Ellie holds a role to this day, in serving in the nursery. Me, I served in a different capacity, but it was servitude, nonetheless.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SISTER ROSE

The...well, let's call it a community for the sake of it, that nuns live in is more expansive than you'd expect.

Think about it like a college. Every dorm, each student housing has its own name, its own society, and its own cultural expectations. But on the whole, they belong to the same school. Within each of these houses, there are those in charge, who answer to those above them, and then there are the ... students.

Now, as you know, gossip and news travel fast amongst these houses, regardless of what faction they belong to, right?

Of course, I'm right.

The community of nuns is no different. We have our convents, but there's an underground delivery system that takes place in each house.

Basically, what I'm trying to say is that you can't keep anything a secret amongst the nuns.

We know everything. We hear it all.

Especially when it's about the fallen.

If you don't think the sisters aren't aware of the priests who favor boys over their vows, who find more excitement in their sadistic urges than when on their knees in prayer, then you are simply a blind and dumb man.

We know. We always know.

Which is how I knew that there was a small fraction within the church that thought like me, that lived like me and that would welcome me into their folds with open arms.

It didn't take much for me to join their ranks, to be considered a sister within the family.

The inclusion I experienced was cathartic. You understand the feeling, I'm sure.

All your life you've been considered different, an outsider, and then finally you find someone, who understands you, who confirms your difference is actually uniqueness that others can't handle, and they love you for who you are, not for who they try to make you to

be.

It's a euphoric emotional response.

The group I became involved in ran a tight network. They had members everywhere, in every church, convent, monastery and public office. They've been in existence for hundreds of years and hardly anyone knows about them.

Well, I guess now you do. You can be included in that small group.

We had one main objective - to reach the unrepentant. Those who lived with hidden sin and needed help confessing. How we reached that objective was...well, objective, I guess you could say.

I came with a special skill set that not many others had perfected.

The art of pain and the release we experience when we embrace that pain.

Now, before you get all high and mighty on me, I'm not talking sexually here. Sure, there is that community, and they're fine to use pain to find that release.

The repentance we seek from God is not one buried in sex. It's layered in pain.

Pain from our actions. Pain of the heart. Pain we cause others. Pain we feel ourselves. Pain from hiding from the truth.

No one is satisfied when they're in pain. No one feels peace or contentment or even joy, when pain hovers over them.

Why is that?

It's because we've been taught that pain is bad for us.

Pain isn't bad. It's good. It's an awakening.

You don't know something is wrong with your body unless you are in pain, right?

You don't know you've hurt someone until you see that pain in their eyes.

You don't know a fire burns inside of a room with a closed door until you feel the pain of the heat on the palm of your hand as you go touch the door handle.

Pain doesn't have to be a bad thing. It can be used for good.

I became known as the rose with thorns and people came to fear my thorns.

That was unfortunate.

Yes, my thorns were painful, but the level of pain people experienced was up to them.

There was always going to be pain when I got involved, but how much and for how long...that was always out of my hands.

There are many rumors about me. Rumors of my victims around the world, and yes, many of those rumors are true. But I don't like to think of them as my victims. They were part of my family, and seeing family members suffer is never easy.

What I did was scriptural, are you aware of that?

Ezekiel instructs us on how we are to help those amongst the fold with sin in their lives and hearts. If we judge without giving them the opportunity to repent...well, Ezekiel says 'his blood shall be on your hands. But if you warn the wicked and they don't turn from their wicked ways, they shall die, but you will have delivered your soul.'

Scripture right there says we all deserve a chance to turn from sin.

That's what I was called to do: to give my fellow sisters and brothers the opportunity to see the wrong path they were on and help them find new ground.

I was sent everywhere. Rarely the United States, not till the end, but I visited Africa, Italy and South America.

I was in South America a lot.

They called me Sister Thorn there. Not Sister Rose.

I never liked the name even though I understand how I got it.

It's a story told to novices, like how parents warn their kids about the boogeyman, novices would be warned about me.

I was often instructed to remain a secret, to not leave any hint of my presence, but sometimes, it was necessary to announce I'd been there.

Sometimes, I'd be instructed to leave a rose.

I wouldn't just leave the rose with the unrepentant.

I'd tack the rose onto the door, for everyone to see.

Once, I left a fellow sister in her classroom. I had her seated at her chair, secured with rope, with her holding a bouquet of roses - one for every child she'd purposely hurt.

From what I'm told, when the students arrived that morning, they cheered, knowing they were now protected.

What did I do to her?

She was weak. She refused to confess, claiming she was in charge of those children's souls and each child she hurt to the point of death deserved what they got, especially since they were so evil.

Evil. A child? The only one evil in that room was her.

No child deserves to die.

No child deserves to be hurt.

Every child deserves to be protected, especially by those with a calling to protect them.

In an orphanage run by the church, it's those in leadership who are responsible for the oversight of those children's safety. Not just to see them in heaven. To ensure they are safe here on earth.

I'll be honest. I rarely gave them more than two opportunities to repent. Anyone who hurts a child on purpose doesn't deserve God's forgiveness.

Don't you agree?

She died via rat poisoning, but not before I tore off every single nail on her hands and feet. I gave her that many chances to repent, which was a mistake on my part.

She was one of my firsts, and I still believed that everyone deserved a chance at forgiveness.

Every nail I tore off was for one of the children that had died while under her careful watch.

I even said their names as I tore the nail off.

She screamed. I was surprised no one heard her and came running to her aid.

She was responsible for the deaths of nineteen children, that we knew about. That last fingernail was for me. It was on that one that I inked her initials. That one I took after she died.

And no, I didn't take communion with her body. She didn't deserve to be remembered and honored like that.

CHAPTER NINE

SISTER ROSE TO JACK

*You don't happen to have the photos of my nail collection, do you?
I could point out each victim to you.*

[Jack here: I told her I didn't have the photo. I've seen it, however. It's fucking amazing, to be honest.]

I rented an apartment. I wanted a place that was my own, not shared by anyone, not seen by anyone.

Nuns can do that, you know. We don't all have to live in the convent.

I'm a very independent woman. I wanted a place to run to, to escape to, a place that was all mine.

It was a two-bedroom condo. Nothing fancy. Very plain. But it was mine and that's what mattered.

One bedroom was where I slept.

The other was where I researched those I would eventually visit.

It's also where I kept the nails.

Unlike the walls in the village, I put mine in frames and attached that frame to the wall. On the back of each frame was the name, location and reason for why I ended up with their nail.

Well, not on every one. Maybe half. The ones they charged me for, at least. The others were...personal.

Yes, not every assignment I took was sanctioned. Some were from my own homework I'd done. From the rumors I'd heard and the research I'd completed on my own.

Truthfully, those are the ones I'm proud of most.

Those are probably also the ones you want to know, isn't it?

CHAPTER TEN

SISTER ROSE

Father Theodore Rooke.

He went by Father Ted, Father Theo or Brother Rooke.

He was the type of priest everyone trusted. He was the perfect son for a Catholic mother, and all the women, whether young or old, loved him.

No, he didn't have a thing for the young ones.

He had a thing for the grandmothers. Not sexual, get that out of your head.

I think he grew up with a witch of a grandmother who died before he could properly heal his emotional wounds.

This is just my own opinion, of course.

He was known for praising the older generation, for often mentioning them in his homilies. He was big on ensuring the younger generation grew up respecting their elders, and you'd think it was because of the influence of the older women in his own lives.

This man was a chameleon.

He may have looked like a younger Brad Pitt, but he had the heart of Charles Manson.

His congregation was known to be younger. There were only a few of the older generation who attended his mass, who took communion with him.

It was often whispered, sometimes in a teasing manner, that if you were ready to die, all you had to do was take mass with Father Ted and you were as good as dead.

If only people knew how true that statement was.

Yes, the older grandmothers loved Father Ted. But they never stuck around long.

If you asked him, he'd tell you it was all God. These women were all ready to go, to meet their Heavenly Father, they just needed to know it was okay. That's why God connected them...so Father Ted could help them make that transition.

Except, most of these women, when they first met Father Ted, they were healthy and probably could have lived five, ten or more

years.

These were spry women, full of vinegar, matriarchs to their families. They weren't anywhere near death's door.

Father Ted came on my radar in the early years.

At first, I thought nothing of it. But I kept my ears to the ground, I did a little bit of research on my own, and I spoke with several Sisters who served with him.

No one came right out and said he killed all these women, but then, no one had to.

I saw it in person.

It was following a group bible study at the church.

An older lady stayed behind and was seeking counsel from Father Ted. While us nuns cleaned up, he sat there, bible in his lap, and listened with some attentiveness. He eventually asked the woman to walk with him to a separate room where they could have some privacy - I think we were making too much noise for him.

I kept my eye on him. He took this woman to a room a few doors down, careful to leave the door open. After about five minutes he came out and I asked if I could help him.

He waved me off, stating he was only in search of water.

He filled two glasses up and then headed off to a counter. He unlocked a cupboard drawer, pulled out a container, put a spoonful of powder into the glass, stirred it a few times, added a straw, and then returned to the room.

I asked one of the other nuns what he'd put in that glass.

She laughed and took me over to the cupboard that was labeled Private.

Apparently, Father Ted has his own cupboard where he kept things like his favorite cookies, granola bars, and containers of Metamucil. He keeps it locked because a few of the youth had sticky hands.

To most people, him drinking a glass of stool softener wasn't overly suspicious.

I'm to most people.

About thirty minutes later, Father Ted called out that he'd called emergency services.

By the time the medical personnel arrived, the woman in his office was dead.

The official report was that the woman had been feeling unwell and suffered a heart attack.

I didn't buy it.

A few others didn't either, but no one would say it publicly.

Father Ted mourned hard for that woman, claiming he wished there was more he could have done. Everyone around him would pat him on the back, tell him it wasn't his fault, that she was old and it was obviously her time.

Yes, she was old. No, it wasn't her time. Those stupid platitudes need to be erased from our vocabulary, if you ask me.

No one questioned if she'd been poisoned.

No one thought twice about the fact Father Ted came out for water and put some mysterious powder in a cup.

I did mention it to the police when they came by the next day.

They even asked to see the container, took a sample, but nothing came of it. I knew nothing would. Father Ted had changed it out to a fresh container - I saw him with my own eyes, but I wanted him to know his gig was up.

I wanted to know if he'd be remorseful. Contrite. Repentant.

I hoped he would be.

I should have known better.

Some people, all it takes is a hint that they'd been caught.

Other people see it as an opportunity to continue, skirting the line even closer, seeing how far they could go before someone noticed.

Father Ted was like that. Of course he was. He was the golden boy, loved by all, fawned over by everyone. He could do no wrong.

I didn't stay long, but I kept in touch with a few new friends from the congregation and always kept my eye out on the obits.

Wouldn't you know it, not even six months later, another grandmother, has a heart attack and after attending a service at the church.

I returned to the scene of the crime.

I locked myself in his small rectory bedroom and waited for him to arrive.

When he did, we played a little game of guess which glass of water isn't poisoned.

It's always good to give them a taste of their own medicine.

Of course, I took a nail - one from a toe, as he was dying.

I gave him plenty of opportunity to repent, but he claimed he did nothing wrong.

If that was the case - then why was he nervous about the two

containers of Metamucil I had out on his dresser, right? If one of them wasn't poison, then there was no issue.

I didn't make him drink.

I reminded him of his responsibilities to God. He selected the water glass. He drank of his own free will.

The fact he died of a heart attack was on him. Not me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SISTER ROSE

Body mortification isn't a new concept, especially in the Catholic Church.

Neither is redemptive suffering. Surely, you've heard of that, haven't you? How through physical pain we can place ourselves in a better state for accepting God's grace. It's not that the act of physical harm to our body produces the forgiveness, that's only for God to give, but it places us in a pennant state for that forgiveness.

Your eyes are glazing over, Jack.

I'm sure you've seen the scars on my back. Those were inflicted intentionally.

The movies and television shows that portray these priests who flog themselves...they're not that far off base.

Why am I saying this? To explain Friar Max.

Friar Max was a delicious and devious man.

He had skin of black satin with a smile to swoon most nuns.

He moved around a lot. He was a fill in for congregations that recently lost their priest for one reason or another. He never stayed long, just long enough to leave a lasting impression.

In a few of the churches, the nursery had a burst of new babies in attendance nine months following his stay there.

It could never be proved, no woman ever spoke up to say he was the father, but the Sisters knew.

We always know.

He didn't believe that one should give up the desires of the flesh just because they serve God. He believed that even sexual pleasure was a gift freely given to us from our Father.

He even tried to seduce me when we met. Can you believe that?

He wasn't repentant. The scars on his shoulders and back, they were to show how devout he was to his God, but they had nothing to do with the status of his heart.

I don't need to go into too much detail, but I cut off his penis and made him eat his balls.

Sin of the flesh was obviously too much for him. It was better

that he entered heaven half of a man with a purer heart than a whole man with a devious one.

Don't you think?

CHAPTER TWELVE

SISTER ROSE TO JACK

1 Corinthians says that God judges those outside the church, whereas we are given authority to judge those inside it. I believe the scripture even goes on to say “purge the evil person from among you.”

My calling was true. No one has ever been able to sway me from that. Not even being in here.

You’d be amazed at the number of inmates who claim to follow Christ but live with so much sin. It wears them down until they can’t carry the weight anymore.

I listened to them, Jack. Listened and helped guide them toward true repentance.

I know they found my nail collection from here. Do you know what they did with it?

[Jack here: I do know but she won’t hear of it from me. The Warden confiscated it and no doubt it’s in his personal collection.]

I don’t know exactly what you are expecting from me, but it’s probably not this, is it?

Do others go into more details? Do they give you all the gory bits? You know I won’t do that, don’t you? That’s not me.

Sure, I believe in the power of pain but not to glorify it. It must have its uses. To purify. To strengthen. To open your soul to God.

Every person I spent...time with, they deserved what they got.

They were child molesters. Child abusers. Murders. Unrepentant sinners.

They were here, they were in third world countries, they were even in the holy city.

Some of those...they were the worst of the lot.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SISTER ROSE

Have you ever been to the eternal city?

No, I'm not talking about Rome. The Vatican City. A country within a country, home to the Pope and all his minions.

It's hell on earth, whether you believe that or not.

Sure, it's beautiful with all its diabolical history. The amassed fortune behind those city walls is unforgivable. That wealth should be used for good, to help the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the sick...Jesus wouldn't have collected all that wealth and kept it for only a few to see. No, He would have distributed it to His children, to help ease their pain and suffering.

The men and women within the walls of the Vatican City are insufferable.

I worked with an organization founded by those who serve the Pope. I worked for them for more than five years, fulfilling every task, overseeing every project handed to me, and where did it get me?

It got me here. Within these walls. Forgotten.

I've been forgotten, and that's something that hurts deep inside.

When I first joined them, I believed in what they did. Their goal, their purpose, was to protect the Church from within.

It all goes back to 1 Corinthians. God told us to judge those within, that was our responsibility and I took that responsibility seriously.

Those who were stealing from the church, living double lives, living in sin...we were purging the ranks to protect the sheep.

Sadly, corruption doesn't stop at the church doors. Sometimes it lives within the walls and invades every breathable space. It moves beyond the shadows and lives in the light, believing it's invisible.

My job was to prove otherwise and I was good at it.

I was the ghost who left behind the rose. Those in the 'know', knew.

I didn't punish needlessly - just what was necessary.

Like the cardinal who had a thing for bondage - not for himself,

but for watching others be bound and flayed. Yes, you heard me right - flayed.

I made sure he felt everything he'd made others feel. Flaying skin isn't something I recommend or even like to do, but it was a means to an end.

I had to make sure the end couldn't be covered up enough that the unrepentant could continue to live with no consequences.

I had that happen too many times to count. They claim the need for forgiveness, they get a slap on the wrist, moved to a different position, but nothing changes.

Death is the only way to ensure lasting consequence. It got to the point where my handlers stopped telling me to keep people alive, they knew I'd do what I felt was best.

After all, this was my calling.

If God told me to let them live, I'd let them live, but ensure there would be consequences and distinct changes to their lifestyle.

Oh, I see you're intrigued. I'd cut off body parts, maim them in a noticeable way so they could no longer serve the sheep and lead them astray, does that explain things better?

I'm sure you've heard about all the underground tunnels and areas beneath the Vatican, right?

I've been there personally. Walked those pathways. Found some invaluable treasure bearing secrets.

When you know someone's secret, you hold power over them. When you hold power over them, you are in a position to help guide their steps and change the course of their path.

Those that were kept alive, they weren't ignored or forgotten about.

I'd send them a rose, on a regular basis, as a memory of their promise, of their repentance, and to let them know they're being watched.

The organization I worked for continues to do that. It was a promise they made after they left me to hang for their crimes. A promise for a promise.

One soul for the betterment of the collective, right?

I'm not in here because I was caught. There was never a trial, I was never convicted of any crime.

I became a prisoner in this God-forsaken asylum because I was the sacrifice.

I knew it would happen. I accepted it a long time ago.

Someone in the organization messed up, and I was the one to pay. My skillset wasn't one-of-a-kind, so they easily found someone to take my place.

I'm not the first patsy nor was I the last.

I'm not saying I was innocent. We both know I'm not. But I'm not unforgivable either.

Someone high up in the Church screwed up in a way that could damage the church irrevocably if found out. If they were to be punished, there would be a trickle down effect, from the top to the bottom, affecting even the sheep in the fold.

That couldn't happen.

So it was pinned on me. Me, a nobody in the eyes of many. I was the lamb on the sacrificial alter and I've always been okay with that.

I said a promise for a promise, earlier, right?

They promised to continue with the roses as long as I promised never to reveal my secrets.

I haven't broken that promise, not even now, talking with you. I haven't given you anything you can act on.

You can't go to the press to tell them about this secret organization, because you know nothing about it. You don't know the name, who runs it, who they've targeted or even who works with them.

For all you and the world know, I'm just a rambling lunatic who calls herself a nun, about to die.

The people I've told you about - I doubt you can find any information on them, even if you do a deep dive. See...I didn't tell you everything and some of the things I did tell you, I stretched the truth, twisted it enough that it doesn't even resemble what actually happened.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SISTER ROSE TO JACK

Don't be mad at me, Jack.

I'm not stupid. Even in here, there are ties to the church.

It doesn't matter who you say anything to - the Warden, your mother, tell someone about me over drinks...the Vatican will find one, one way or another.

Why do you think Sister Ellie is here?

Tell me - did she arrive before or after I came?

If it was before...how soon before my arrival? I bet it was only a month or two, long enough to become a fixture by the time I arrived, long enough for anyone suspicious and looking for connections to look the other way when it came to her.

Why do you think I didn't want her here? Why I don't want her near my body?

She's part of the same organization I was.

In fact, she could be my sister-twin.

She slipped up, early on, after I'd first arrived.

She sang a song over someone who had recently died. She didn't think anyone would notice, she didn't think anyone was close enough to hear her, but I was and I did.

See...the Vatican knew of my time with the natives. They knew of the villages I'd stayed, of where I learned my practices.

They might say that I was a teacher and taught others my ways, but I know better.

Some were taught straight from the source.

When it comes to recording histories, diving into secrets and unearthing deep beliefs, no one does it better than the Church.

Say what you will, I don't trust Sister Ellie. You shouldn't either, Jack.

In fact, you should be very careful when it comes to her.

Don't think she is blind to what you do. You're on a list somewhere, trust me. The only benefit to you is that you're not Catholic, thus you're not held to a certain standard.

So maybe you're safe. Maybe you're fine.

But don't trust her, whatever you do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JACK

Sister Rose's last words kind of surprised me.

I wasn't sure if she was telling the truth or what, but I didn't call Sister Ellie until after she was dead.

She wasn't pleased with me, I'll just say that.

It was the end of my shift and I was walking down the stairwell when she joined me.

"What did she say to you, Jack?" Sister Ellie stood there, hands clasped tight in front of her stomach. If I didn't catch the anger that lined the worry lines on her face, I would have thought this was just a casual conversation.

The white knuckles on her fingers, confirmed otherwise.

"Exactly what you thought she'd tell me."

I didn't say any more. First, I want to look into Sister Ellie and find out exactly when she arrived. A bug is in my brain now with this doubt and until I know the truth, I won't be telling her a single thing.

"Did she seem repentant?"

"Does that matter to you?"

"Every soul matters, Jack. Even yours."

Was that a veiled threat? A promise? I can't tell.

"I doubt much changed from when you spoke to her to when she died. She died on her own terms, with a smile on her face that she would be in heaven. Whatever sins she had to confess, she did on her own terms, with her own words."

Her head cocks to the side. "You heard her ask for forgiveness?"

I give a little snort. "Did you really expect me to listen in on that? You know me better, Ellie, or you should. That was between her and God. Say your little prayers for her and then leave her in God's hands...isn't that what you tell me all the time?"

I brush past her, eager to leave this hell hole and this conversation.

If there was anything good that resulted from my chat with Sister Rose, it's this: I'll be keeping a closer eye on Sister Ellie, that's

for damn sure.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It's after shift and I'm at my favorite place to relax - the pub.

It's pretty quiet, only a few others in the place. I lift my hand in greeting as I head to the bar and plop down on a stool.

"Good shift?" Chad Mayes, the owner and bartender, says as he pours me a pint of beer.

"A good shift is one that's over," I say. I crack my neck, enjoying the pop-pop-pop of release and then to the same to my knuckles.

He slides the beer over and I enjoy that first sip of the yeasty brew.

God, there's nothing better than a cold beer after a round with the hellions at the Asylum. It doesn't matter how many beds are filled, the second my shift is over and I leave that place, my body relaxes and it's nice.

Fucking nice.

I take a look at Chad. "New ink?" His left arm looks different, but I can't pinpoint why.

He glances down then moves closer, showing me his arm.

"Filled in some places, added a little more texture to highlight this part. It was getting dull."

I've seen a lot of tats in my time, but his are probably my favorite. He's got the four horsemen on his arms and they're fucking fabulous. He shows off the flames that are more pronounced and I've got to agree, they look good.

"Who's your guy again?" Every time I ask, he won't tell, but I'm hoping one day he'll spill. I'd like to get some more ink done but a good artist, a really good artist, is hard to come by in this place.

"He's pretty picky on clients," Chad says. "Sorry man. It's invite only."

I nod, drink more beer and keep looking at the ink on his arms. Something about one of them looks familiar and it's like pieces of things I've seen start clicking together.

"Is that a triangle hidden on that horses mane?" I point to what I think I'm seeing.

Chad gives me this look, like either I'm crazy or I just surprised him, I can't tell which.

"I'm serious. I think I've seen that before."

"No shit," Chad says, his voice a little lower, a little deeper and a whole fucking darker than normal. "You've seen it? Where?"

So I'm not off base then. Interesting.

I think back to the different patients of mine who have had similar ink. A set of three triangles with lines through them. What did they say...they're special, invite only...

"A few patients over the years have had them. One guy was quite proud of all the marks in the shapes."

Now, I've never been afraid of Chad. Sure, he's scary looking with his bulging muscles and regular scowl on his face, but he's a good guy, a good friend. He used to do some crazy shit in the city, worked as a bouncer for some club and highlighted as private security for some less than desirable folks, but came back home to run the pub after his old man passed away.

I've never been afraid of him, but the look on his face now would make any other person piss their pants.

He leans forward, face inches from mine. "If you know what's good for you, don't ever mention those tats to anyone, you hear me? You've never seen them. Got it?"

I laugh. I can't help it. What the fuck is his problem?

I lean closer to him so our nose almost touch and I can smell his god-awful breath. "You should know by now I don't scare easily."

It takes a few seconds, but he finally leans back and slaps his towel down on the bar top. "I'm serious, Jack. I know you've heard shit, and I know what you do...fuck." He pulls out his phone with a sigh. "You still serious about getting a new tat? I might just be able to hook you up with my guy, but I've got to warn you - you don't tell him what you want, he picks for you."

What the fuck? Ink is personal. No fucking way someone else gets to pick that shit out for me. Every design on my body means something.

"So he picked out those for you? Did you even want them?" I eye the four horsemen that cover both his arms - the angels of Death, Famine, War and Conquest. The horses they set on are just as fucking scary as the angels themselves.

"Like I said, he picks them for you, based on what you tell him. He's like you in that sense, a story for a story. You tell him a story, he'll give you one in ink."

Okay, now I'm fucking intrigued.

“Sure, hook me up.”

He sends a text then pockets his phone. “I’ll let you know what he says. Just remember what I said. A story for a story, so you better make it a fucking good one. Tell him about the ones who have ink like this one.” He taps on the triangle.

He goes to walk away from me, but I’m not ready to end this conversation. “Why do you have it? I know why my patients did, they told me how they earned their marks, but what about you?”

I didn’t put two and two together just until now. Over the years I’ve seen that tat but didn’t really think anything of it. Not until now.

“That’s my fucking business and none of yours.” Chad practically growls at me. “Beer’s on the house tonight, but after your done that one, I want you to leave.”

Well fuck. I’ve never been kicked out of here before. What the fuck is going on.

“Listen man,” I hold up my hands as if to placate him. “Whatever I did or said, I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head, his lips a fine line and the tension radiating from his body is like a flash of heat coming my way.

“Leave it alone, alright?”

I nod.

He nods back, his shoulders relaxing.

He walks away and I drink my beer, processing what just went down.

My patients are serial killers, murderers, rapists and more. Some of their confessions are fucked up, some are true, some aren’t, but I know that some of what they tell me is exaggerated - for their own benefit.

But how likely is it that some of them would have similar tattoos? I mean, these triangles aren’t something you’d see in an artist album, and it sure as hell isn’t something someone would randomly select for their body.

One of them said something about adding the marks himself, one for every life he stole. If that’s fucking true...there’s more to Chad than I thought.

Fuck...maybe I should take Chad’s advice and leave it alone. My imagination is running wild and none of it can be even remotely true.

Can it?

(More about a new book from this very idea will be shared via Patreon...so go join if you're intrigued. www.patreon.com/jacksteen)

MORE CONFESSION BOOKS?

Hell yes.

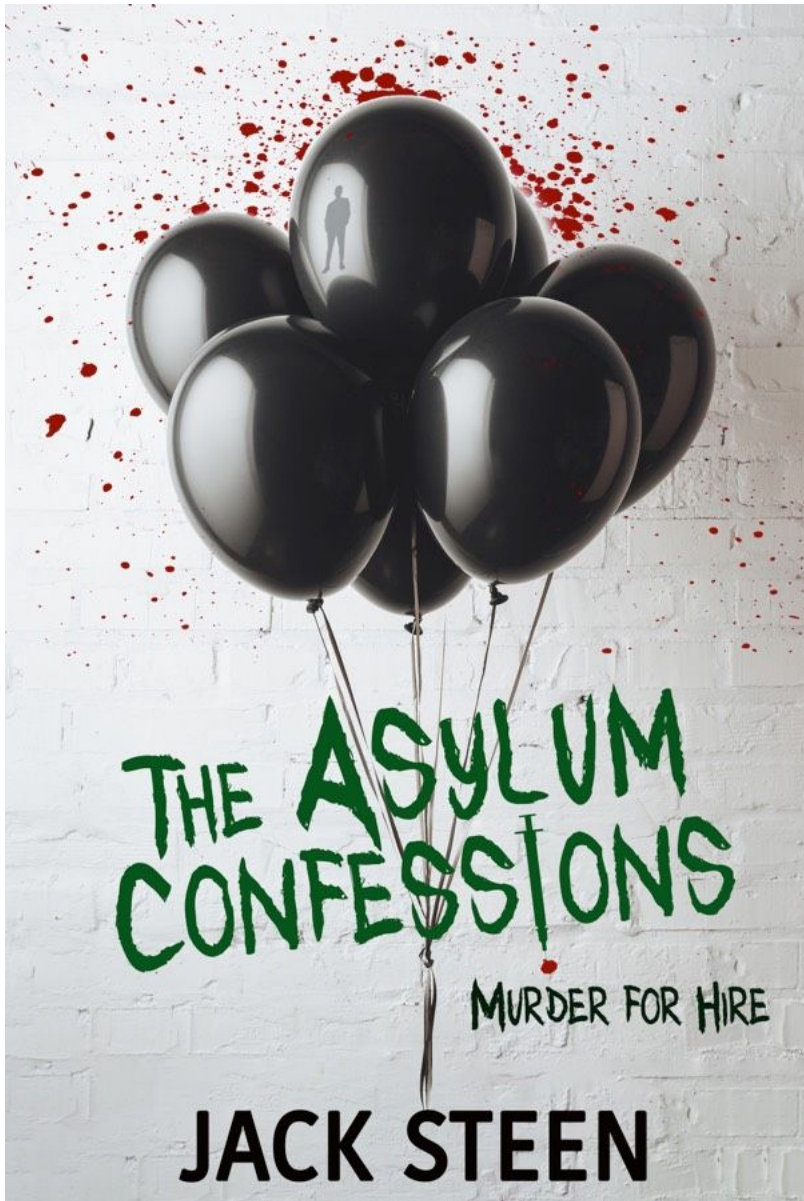
I've got notepads full of confessions.

If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com and join my **NEWSLETTER** (and receive a free confession)

Turn the page to find out about the next confession book coming your way!

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER FOR HIRE



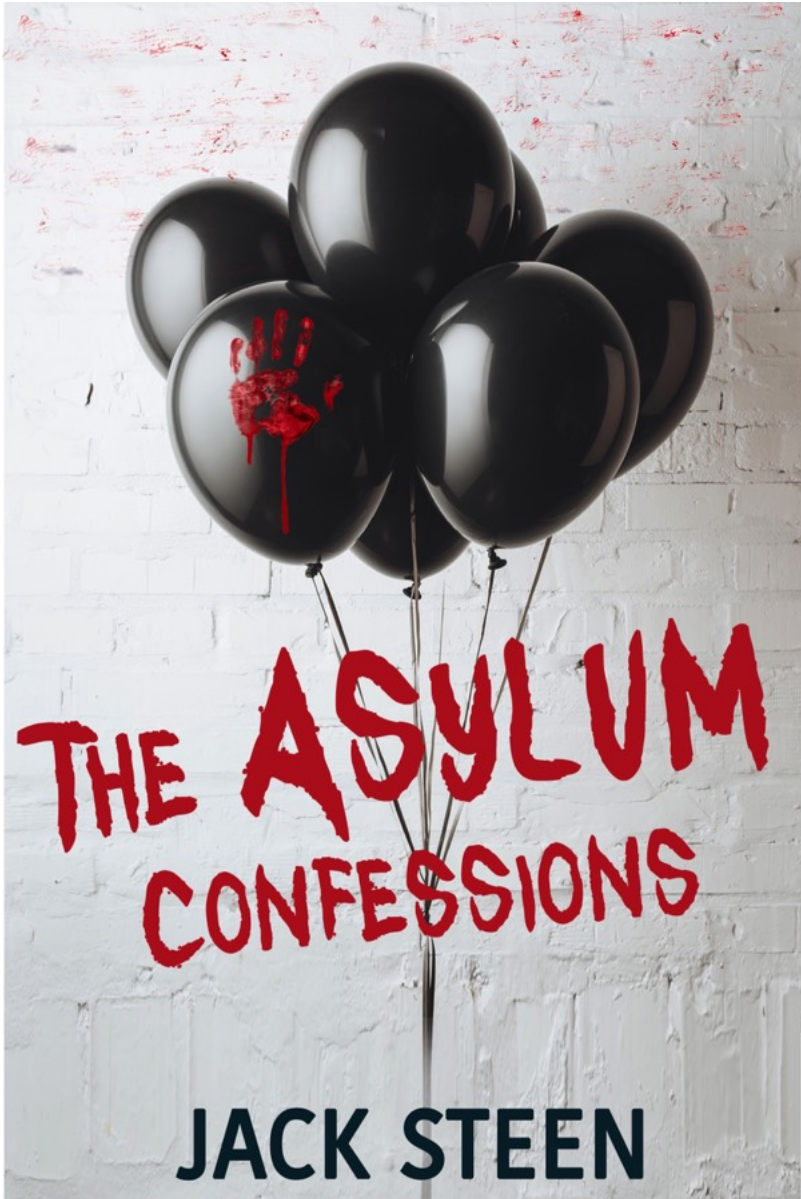
[The Asylum Confessions: Murder for Hire](#)

Some deaths have a price...what's yours?

Order this from my website and you'll get to read it a month before it's

available anywhere else.

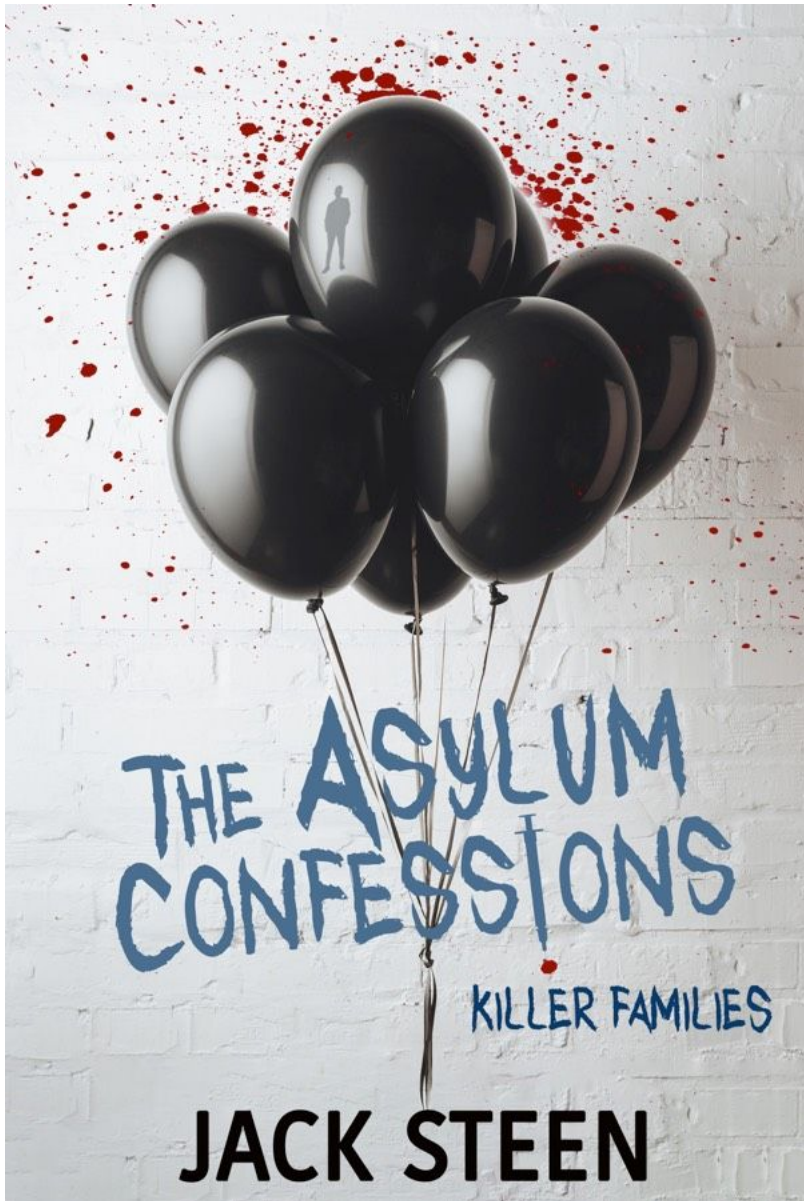
CONFESSION BOOK - THE ORIGINALS



[The Asylum Confessions](#)

The one that started it all! These are a few of my favorite confessions - if you haven't already read them, I hope you enjoy the journey!

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLER FAMILIES

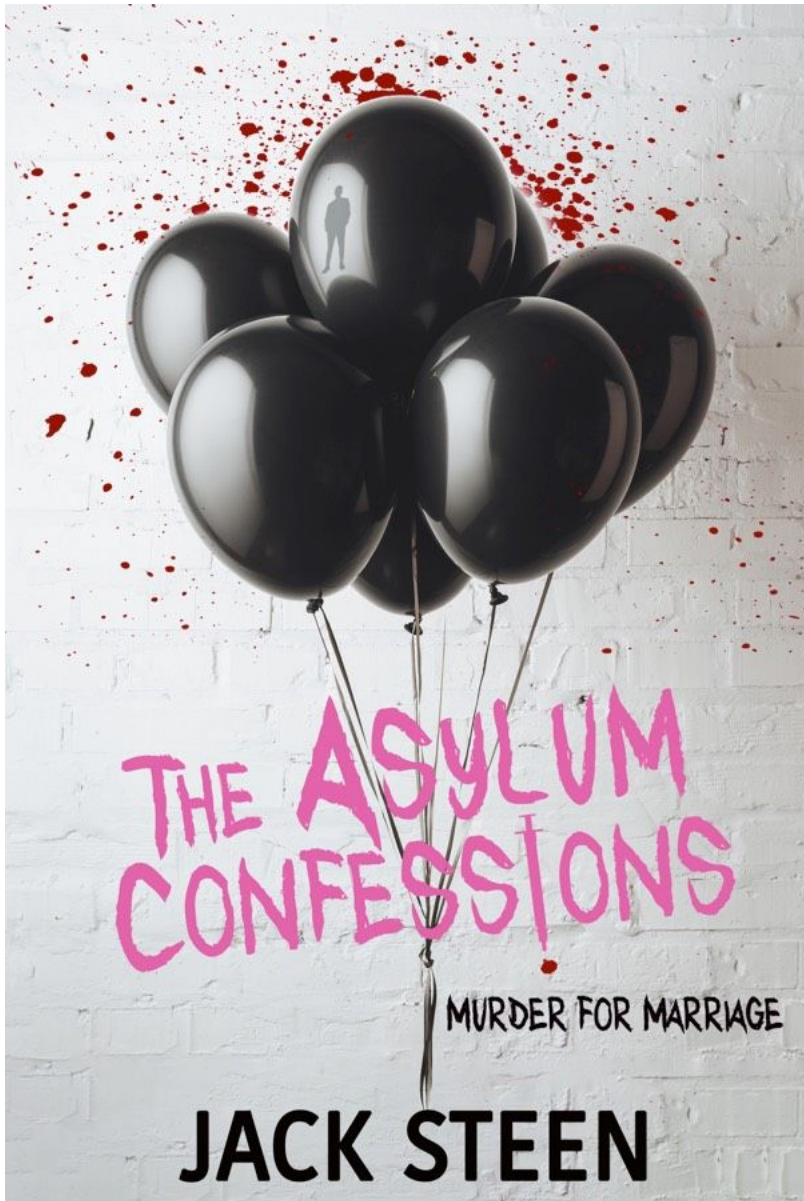


[The Asylum Confessions: Killer Families](#)

More confessions that deal with all things family related.

- One is a father who just wanted to protect his little girl.
- Then there's a pig farmer who never should have had children.
- One wants you to believe he's the brother of a mob boss.
- And then there's one would argue she should receive the Mother of the Year award.

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER FOR MARRIAGE

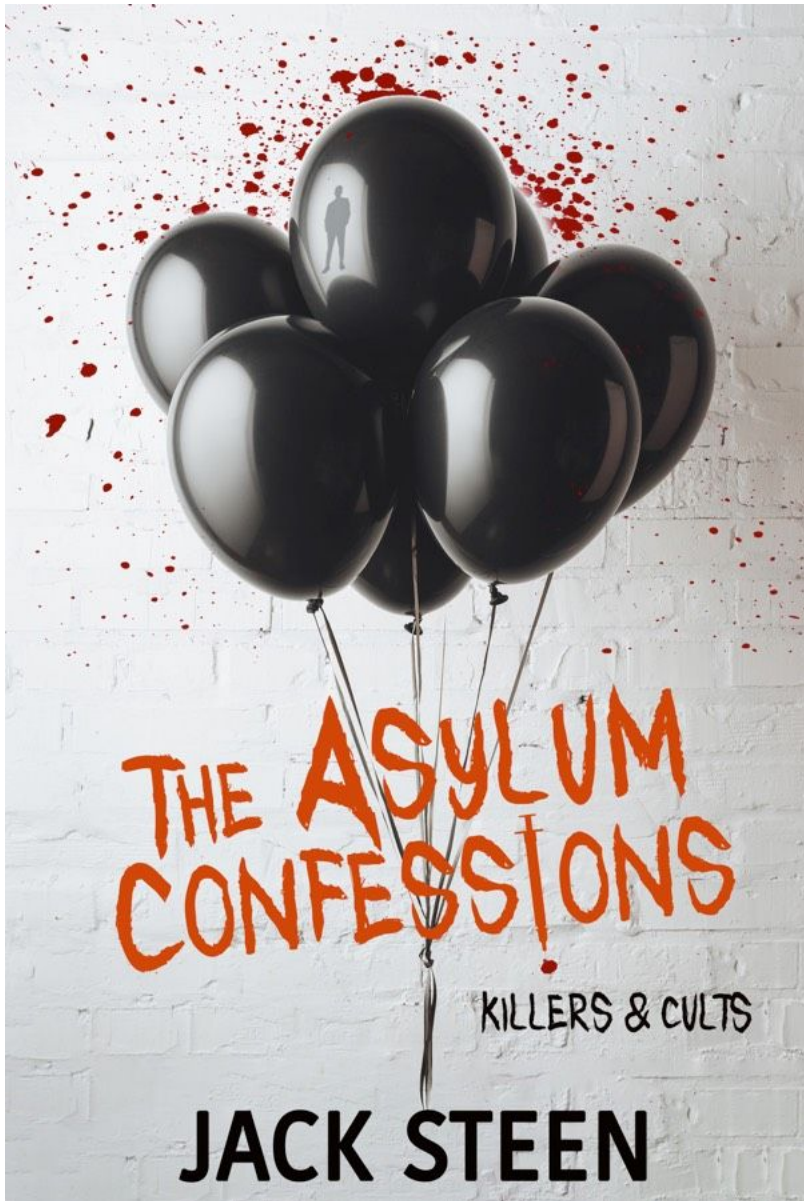


[The Asylum Confessions: Murder for Marriage](#)

The couples that kill together...well, they for sure don't stay together, right? These confessions deal with couples...

- One is a Preacher with a past.
- Another shouldn't be trusted.
- What's with farmers with buried secrets?
- And another who has a thing for soil and gardens.

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLERS & CULTS

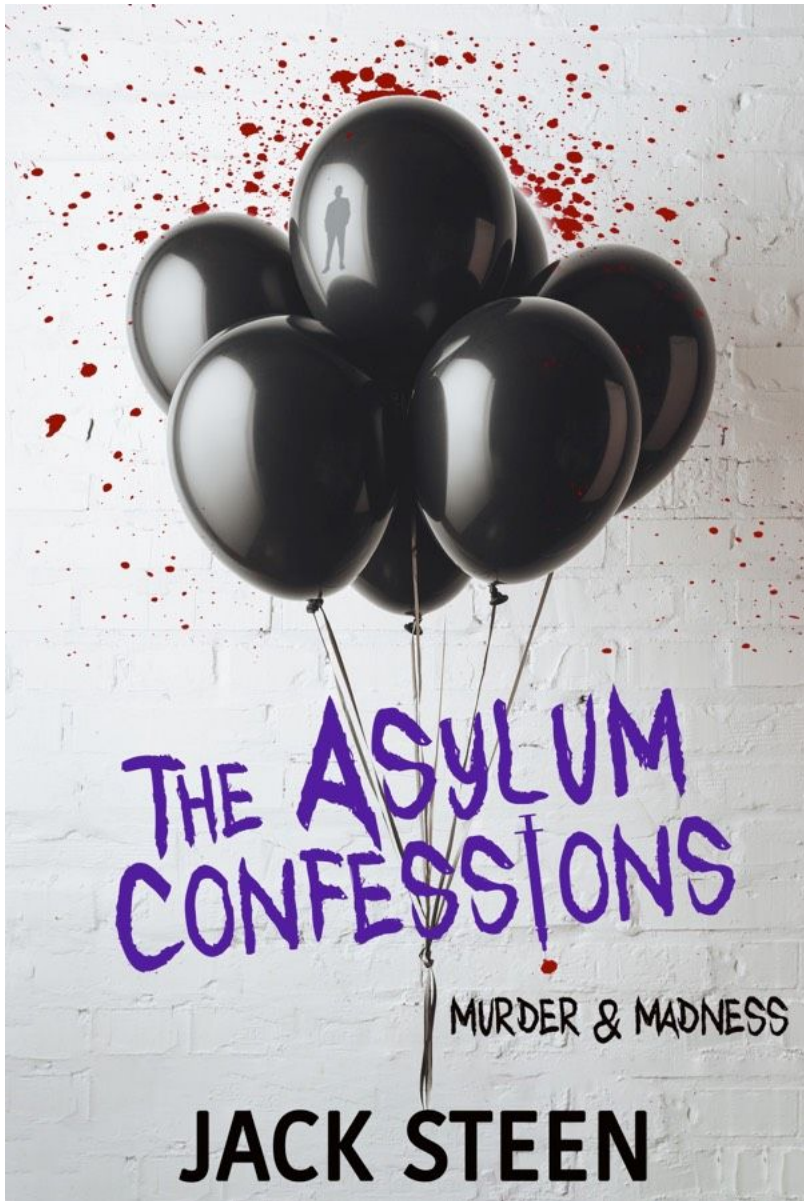


[The Asylum Confessions: Killers & Cults](#)

Trust me on this...these confessions will take you on a wild ride:

- One thought she gave birth to the antichrist.
- Another was called the Candyman...any guess why?
- One grew up in a cult and believes he was the first of a 'pure' race.
- Then there's the guy who claims he was part of a secret test by the government and I've been waiting on his confession for a while!
- Finally, this one who loved Halloween and believed in all the rules. I sure you hope you didn't break any...

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER & MADNESS

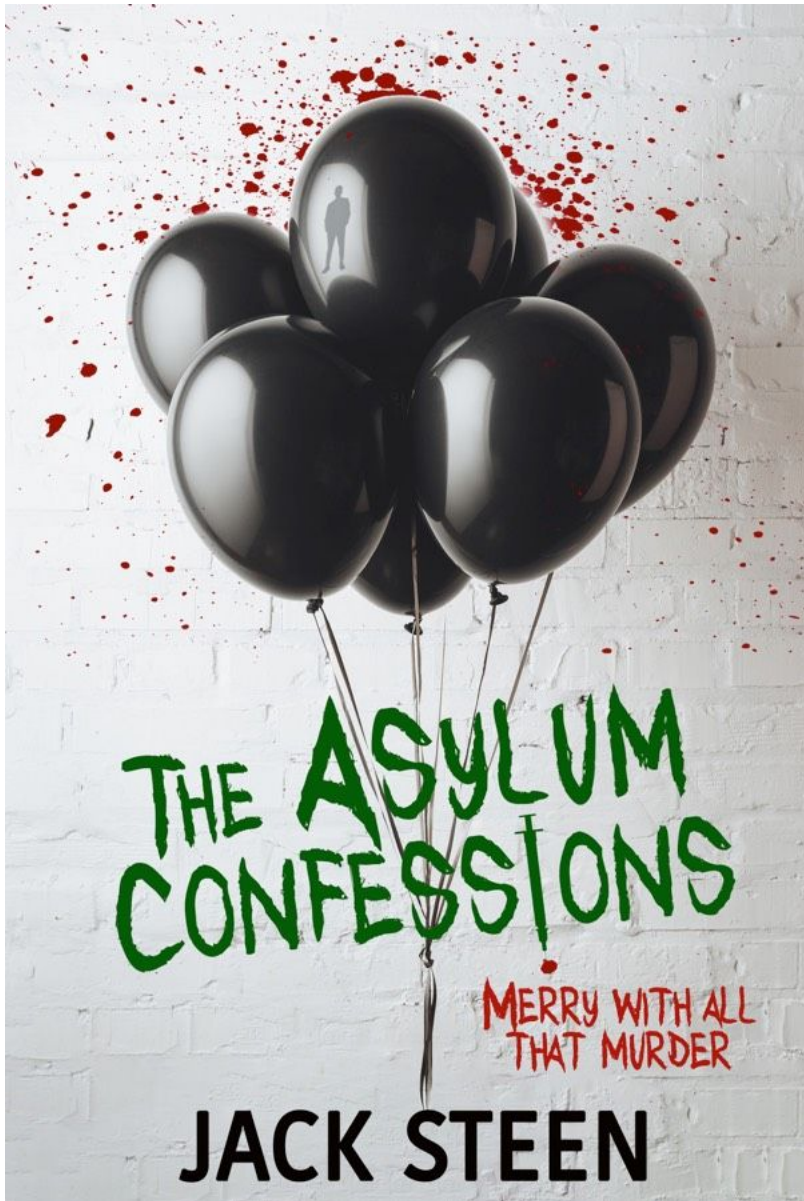


[The Asylum Confessions: Murder & Madness](#)

This book has confessions that remind me of the original Grimm brothers tales - you know, the good ones.

- Think Modern Day Sleeping Beauty – with a twist.
- One with a resemblance to Rapunzel that is kind of scary.
- One reminds me of Cinderella...with a thing for shoes.

CONFESSION BOOK - MERRY WITH ALL THAT MURDER



[The Asylum Confessions: Merry with all that Murder](#)

Christmas isn't always a merry thing for people. These confessions focus on the holiday theme and patients who:

- Likes to nibble on sugar cookies while watching his victim die
- Another likes to replace the jam in the thumbprint cookies with blood
- One patient has a thing about gingerbread cookies and revenge
- And then there's one - give her some candy cane shortbread cookies - after all she's been through, she deserves them.